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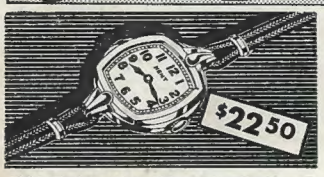

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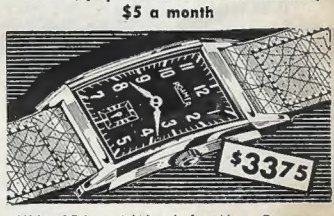

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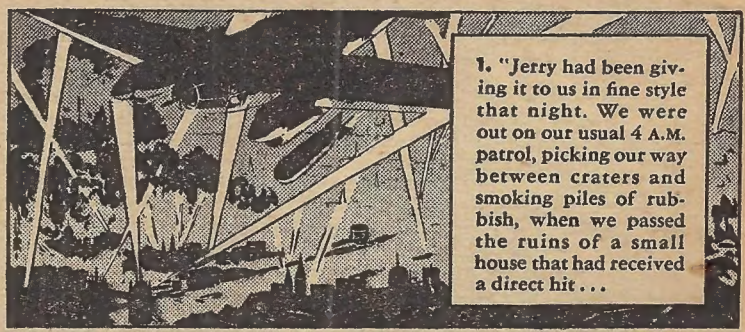

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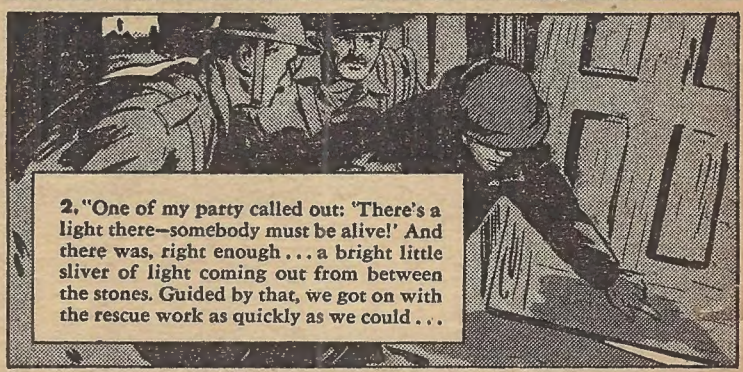

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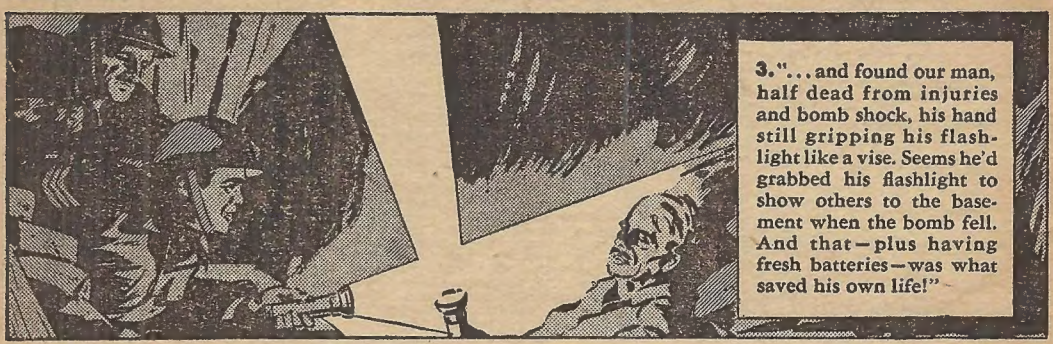

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ROUND-UP ..... THE EDITOR 6
A slice of the same fighting democracy won for us the Western frontier.

NEXT ISSUE PUBLISHED OCTOBER 20, 1943!

Published bi-monthly by Popular Publications, Inc., 2256 Grove Street, Chicago, Illinois. Editorial and executive offices, 205 East Forty-second Street, New York City, 17, Harry Steeger, President and Secretary, Harold S. Goldsmith, Vice President and Treasurer. Entered as second class matter Jan. 31, 1940 at the Post Office at Chicago, Ill., under the Act of March 3, 1879. Title registration pending at U. S. Patent Office. Copyright, 1943 by Popular Publications, Inc. All rights reserved under Pan American Copyright Convention. Single copy price 15c. Yearly subscriptions in U.S.A. $.90. Foreign postage 50c additional. For advertising rates address Sam J. Perry, 205 E. 42nd St., New York, 17, N. Y. When submitting manuscripts kindly enclose stamped self-addressed envelope for their return if found unavailable, and send to Editorial Department, 205 East 42nd Street, New York, 17, N. Y. The publishers cannot accept responsibility for return of unsolicited manuscripts, although all care will be exercised in handling them.

Printed in U. S. A.

ROUND-UP

IT WAS late when we finally got out of the office after putting the magazine to bed, and stopped at the dog wagon for a cup of coffee and a glance at the morning paper.

Sitting around a corner table, chairs tilted back, were three service men. They were respectively, a private, apparently just finished with his basic training, a corporal, and an air cadet. We turned back to our coffee, lit a cigarette, and cocked an ear.

The private turned to the air cadet. "I sometimes wish I was flying," he said, "when K.P. comes around. Boy, I never sweated so much in my life!"

"What'd you do before you went in?" the sergeant asked.

"Oh, sorta led the life of Riley," the private smiled. "My old man happened to strike it rich—prob'ly stole the pants off you fellows' fathers—and made some dough. I went to a fancy prep school, then when I got out of college I found a desk with my name on it in the old man's office."

"Howcome no commission, with those connections?"

"Hell, man," the private said. "I've got some pride. Dad wanted it that way, but I wouldn't have it. Don't even want to try for officer's training. Being an ordinary soldier's good enough for me."

"It's a funny thing," the sergeant said, dropping his cigarette butt into the remaining coffee, "about the Army. Take me, f'rinstance; went in during the depression 'cause I couldn't find a job. I didn't much give a damn then whether I'd like it or not. I needed three squares and a place to bunk—and I found that an' more."

"What's the ribbon for?" the cadet asked, pointing to the sergeant's chest.

"Some lucky Jap bullet skimmed my hide down at Guadalcanal. They shipped me back to the U. S., but I'll be in the thick of it again soon as they let me. I been askin' my C.O., an' he tells me to keep my shirt on." The sergeant grinned.

"What was it like down there?"

"Mainly, no women. That was my big gripe, anyway. As far as the fightin', those Japs are tough, don't let anybody kid you. We'll lick 'em, but it ain't goin' to be any daisy chain."

"I'm itching to get in myself," the cadet said. "That's the way most of the boys in my squadron feel. Quicker we get started fighting, quicker it'll be over. Even the damn' Yankees feel the same way," the Southern boy said, smiling.

"That's one good thing about a war," the private ventured. "People come from different parts of the country, different jobs, backgrounds, and when they're thrown together you're sure something's liable to explode. But instead of that, everyone works together, gripes together, and pretty much enjoys the same things—in fact you begin to think that people are damned the same, no matter where they come from."

"You got something there, College," answered the sergeant. "Before I got into khaki I knocked around the country some, an' behind all the shouting and the yelling between folks I could see that they were sorta cut from the same mold. If the whole country could be mobilized into the army, there wouldn't be no more squabbles from now till doomsday, the way I see it."

"You said it," the cadet put in. "When you live with guys you never knew before, you're kinda wary at first before you'll put in with them. But then, hell, you begin to see they're not too different from you—pretty soon you're buddies."

"It sure worked that way with me," the private said. "Before the war I guess I was what you might call a snob. I remember the first night at Camp Upton, there must've been no less then four guys who wanted to take a crack at me. I learned fast—right fast!"

"Yeah," said the sergeant, "I've seen plenty tough babies who came into the army an' thought they'd change it around to suit them. I might add, lads, that their views on the subject changed abruptly—like they say in the books."

"This might seem like a funny question," the cadet began," but do you ever

(Continued on page 8)

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(Continued from page 6)

get sore about taking orders, Sergeant?"

"Hell, kid, don't you know the first rule of the army? When you pitch a salute at some bird, or take his guff, don't think of the guy—think of the uniform. That's the big thing. These birds who order you around are sorta Uncle Sammy's messenger boys—they're representin' somethin' bigger than you an' me an' the whole works put together."

"I know, Sarge," the cadet continued, "But don't you ever get fed to the teeth when some buzzard gets on your tail?"

"Sure I get sore at times. But then I remember somethin' that most of the guys who do the orderin' know, too. Which is that very few Americans like to give orders and even fewer like to take 'em—which in a lota ways is a damn' good thing. Don't forget—it's no fun havin' to hand out stiff orders to a bunch a boys you wouldn't mind havin' a beer with."

"I get your point, Sarge," the cadet grinned, "but it's not going to stop me from having those wonderful dreams about chasing various looies up various trees at the point of a sharp bayonet."

"Same here," the private put in. "And there're a whole lot of other birds I wouldn't mind giving the same treatment to. About seven hundred politicians included!"

The sergeant nodded, grinning. "My old man used to say he'd never trust a politician any farther than he could throw one—which is not very far 'cause they grow 'em mighty fat these days. Man alive, but they can give out with the mouth, can't they?"

"I'll say," the Southern kid went on. "Sarge, if you only knew why you were fighting the war, you wouldn't believe it—the way those guys tell it!"

"By the way Sarge," the private asked, "what *are* you fighting for?"

The sergeant pulled hard on his ear for a while, and then looked up: "Hell, soldier, I never thought about it like that—but I know what I'm *not* fighting for, which is half the wind that comes a-blowing out of the mouths of too many high-falutin citizens."

"But what are you fighting *for*, Sarge?"

"I never put it into words before, but I guess I and most of us are fightin' for the same things: root for a ball club, speak what we please when we please, go down to the corner bar an' hoist a couple—decent jobs, a chance to marry and have kids that can grow up free an' not made to kowtow before any son on earth, stuff like that I guess—"

"That's O.K. by me," the private nodded in approval.

"Right," said the kid cadet.

We left after that, feeling kind of good. If the future of our country was in the hands of clean, honest hombres like those—well, everything would sure turn out fine. And we still think so. Those boys will fight, and fight mighty damned hard for what they know and love. They're carrying on the heritage of American fighting men since the birth of our great land. As did the pioneers who built our frontier, these men approach their task without fancy ideas and still fancier language—and like their forebears their actions today are telling the story—and it will continue to be one of the most glorious and courageous stories the world has ever heard!

THE EDITOR

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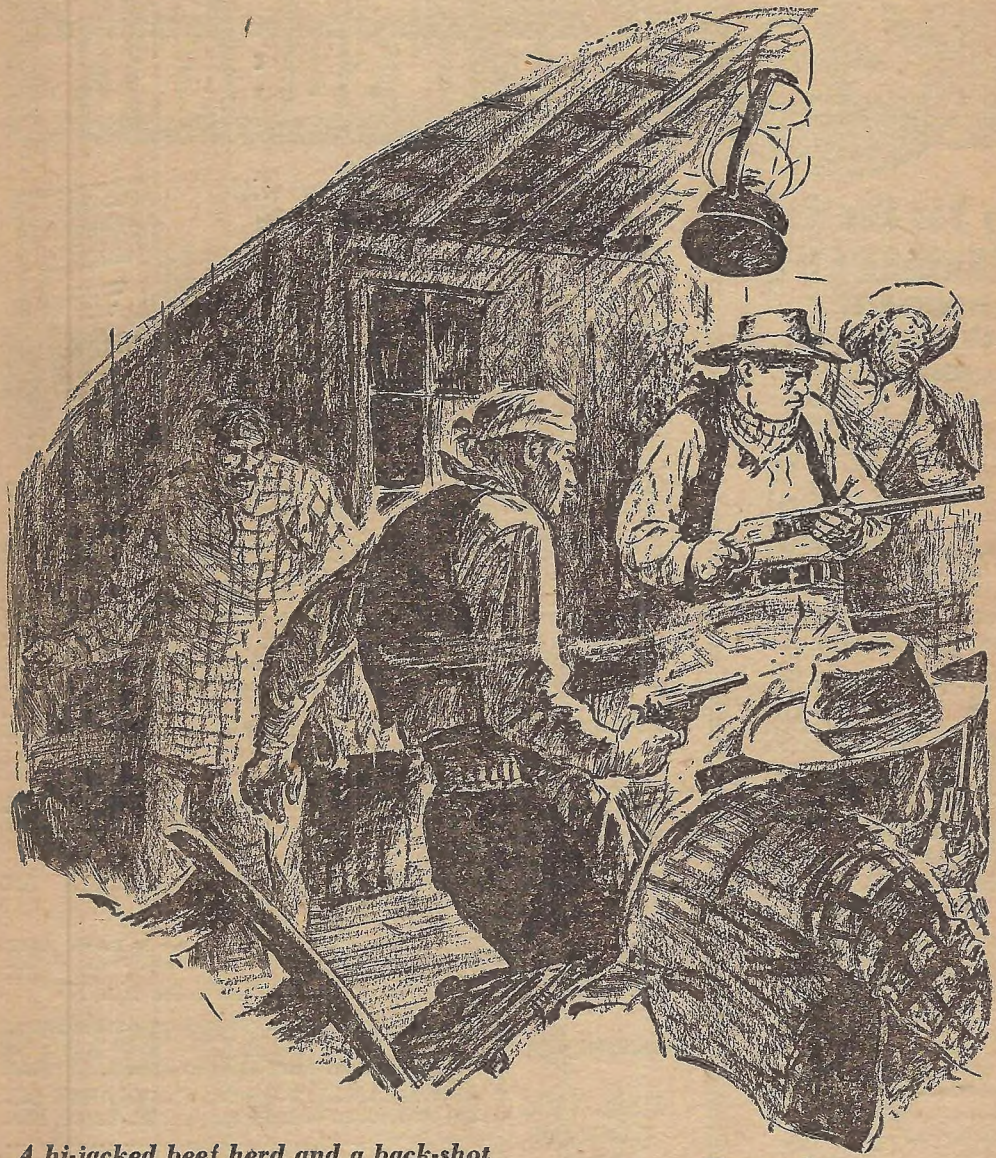


A hi-jacked beef herd and a back-shot old-timer's bloodstained body in the dust of the trail sent Jim Mellody hell-for-leather into Hangtown, hot on the killers' sign. . . . Only to find that he himself was held responsible for the red reign of terror that was making that once-peaceful trail-town synonymous with hell itself.

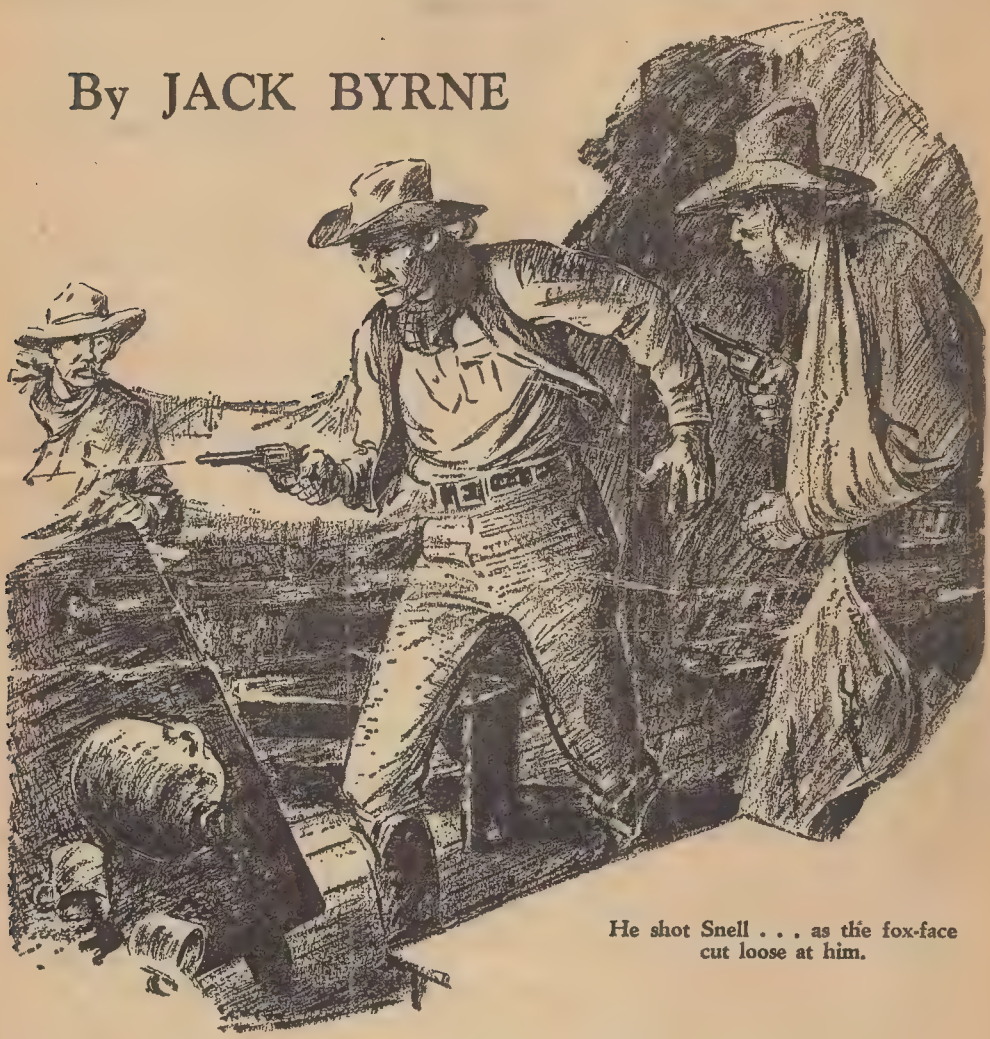
Chapter I

BAIL FOR THE KILLER

THE town was small, the jail was small, but the jailer-deputy was big and tough. He lounged in a chair, his gunboat feet on the desk, and finger-tapped his cartridge belt as he eyed Jim Mellody.

HITS HANGTOWN

By JACK BYRNE



He shot Snell . . . as the fox-face cut loose at him.

Strong Novel of Warring Range Clans

"You better come back later," he repeated. "The judge is sick, the marshal's rode off, an' I got no authority. Come back tomorrow mebby."

"Now listen, mister," said Jim, "let's not wade through all that again. I'm tired and I'm thirsty and my patience is short. I've had a hard ride into here and there's more the same in front of me. I got a hurry-up chore to attend and I want to see Andy Weaver pronto."

"And I'll tell you the final time," said the deputy, "that I'm holdin' no such prisoner."

Jim took a goodly grip on himself. He swallowed, and he wiped his mouth, and he forced himself to look around the meager jailhouse office. Two barred windows, a rack of rifles, reward posters on the wall —he peered at these commonplace things until horse sense was apparently roped from among his mill of broncho impulses.

"Now listen—" he said. "Let's keep our hats on and get this settled—"

Jim Mellody, in the usual course, was the levelest-headed jigger on the Heelfly payrolls. Big Red Lansing, who bossed those widespread cattle outfits and the fabulous Tophet mines as well, claimed that Jim ran icewater in his veins and his skin was so thick as to make him bullet-proof. But now—now with Heelfly men dead in Hangtown, with money robbed and wild Mart Lansing humping hell along the trail—

"My horse tuckered out," said Jim, like a patient schoolma'am explaining to the dunce stool. "I pulled into the stables yonder and saw a saddle I recognized. The blacksmith said that a bunch come through last night and had some trouble. The only one who didn't ride off was the drunkest one, and he was now in the calaboose. That's Andy Weaver, mister—loose-joined, leanish, blue-whiskered chin—"

The deputy put on a look of dumb surprise. It was plain that he liked his present importance, that he didn't intend to be hurried, and that he hadn't particularly cottoned to J. Mellody in the first place.

"Well, well—" he drawled. "So *that's* who he is! Why didn't he say so then? Why'd he claim to be U. S. Grant an' Genril Custer an' Poker Annie? He was free with so many names I put down John Doe for him."

"Andy's got no sense when he's drinkin'," Jim said. "I need to see him right away, I tell you. What's the cost to bail him?"

"For the third time, stranger—"

"All right, all right," Jim muttered. "You hold no authority over prisoners. . . . But would a hundred dollars—call it cash bond or whatever—would that pay his fines and damages and such?"

"A hundred—why, I—that is—"

Jim counted bills from an ample roll. "Buy the judge and the marshal a good cigar if there's any change. I'm much obliged, mister. I'm in a powerful hurry."

The deputy studied him suspiciously, then dropped his gaze to the yellowbacks. "Well—" he drawled.

He scooped the currency into a drawer and produced a ring of keys. With official flourish he readjusted the pistol in his holster. "You better come along an' make sure it's your man," he said. "Shootin' off his mouth so big was what chiefly caused his trouble."

He unlocked a heavy door that opened into a narrow passage. Beyond this was a cage arrangement partitioned into three cramped cells. High loophole slits admitted scant brightness even in the sunny afternoon.

The foretaste of profit had mellowed the hulking deputy. "If you'd bail out this other end cell," he said, "I could take a vacation. Cost you a little more, though, to set a killer free."

Jim grunted. This mule-faced lunk was either showing off or else he was deliberately dawdling to repay him for the sharp words he'd scattered when he first walked into the jailhouse. Pin a tin badge to some thickhead's shirt and he right away gets uppity.

"He sure don't look like a killer," the deputy went on, "but over to Hammock they say he's ring-tailed. Had to fetch 'im here to cool off lynchin' talk. Mebbe you heard of 'im—Vern Hatfield. He murdered old Major John-Ben Logan."

An oath was on Jim's tongue. Hammock—he needed an instant to recognize the rightful name, for Hammock had long been known as Hangtown to the trail riders. Hangtown, where hell might shortly be to pay unless J. Mellody hurried.

"Yessir," said the deputy, "he killed the man who brung 'im up. He lacked the money to pay for his highlife sprees, and when the major refused him more he come to collect with a pistol. He whupped an' shot a poor old man an' almost tore his place down."

"You lettin' Andy out or ain't you?" Jim demanded with repressed fury.

The deputy glared. He jangled his keyring, purposely dropped it, then fumbled three wrong keys at the lock before he pulled the heavy grille open.

"All right, Genril Custer," he growled. "Haul it out of there! Git gone an' damn' good riddance!"

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BUT for a moment Andy Weaver held back. He was coatless, his sleeves in tatters, and even the grime of his face couldn't hide the puffed bruise that

circled one eye like a birthmark. He lingered in the entrance, peering hangdog.

"Go ahead," he said lugubriously. "Cuss the hell from me, Jim—go on! Take a good hefty punch at me, why don't you? I know what I deserve."

"Step lively, Andy," said Jim impatiently. "We're on our way. Your horse is saddled with mine at the stables. Split milk won't get us anywheres."

"You mean—" Andy straightened—"you mean I still get to go?"

The deputy reached and grabbed an arm. He gave a jerk that staggered Andy forward. "Git out of there, you drunken bum! Talked mighty high, didn't you, what you'd do to me when you got loose? Well, you're loose, ain't you?"

"Quit it!" Jim said sharply. "Leave him alone, you hear? You got your money, mister, so call it square. Just open that other door again and we'll all go peaceful."

"We will, huh?" The deputy rested ham-sized fists on his hips. Jim Mellody was no runt, but this big mule-face topped him with inches to spare, outweighed him sixty-eighty pounds. "Who the hell you think you are, givin' orders here? Who do you think you're bossin' around? I never liked the cut of your lip nohow."

Jim motioned Andy Weaver back. His anger had faded, and instead of irritation he felt the cool run of decision. He had flashed quite a roll of bills outside, and the sight might have planted some get-rich notions in Mr. Thickhead. Force some squabble—jail 'em both—grab the cash and let 'em squawk for it. . . .

He had no spare time, either, to fuss and flurry here. Hangtown lay some thirty rough miles beyond, and Mart Lansing had a fifteen hour start. It might already be too late—

"Now look, mister," Jim said mildly, "if I spoke out of turn I'm sorry for it." He was shrugging, spreading a gesture, and two easy paces narrowed the gap between them. "To show how my heart's in the right place I'm goin' to hand you this—"

He was launching with the words, his fist was driving. It was not a sneak punch, not exactly. The deputy saw it coming, but he wasn't prepared for Jim's particular brand of speed that was something like a rattler's uncoil. Mule-Face tried to lurch aside, to duck his head, to paw his gunbutt, but he wasn't fast enough. The cannoning fist hit the turn of his jaw and drove him.

He reeled and his long arms wing-flapped. He was too much meat for any one punch to level, but the force behind Jim's knuckles was enough to stumble him back three tottery strides and bump his weight against a prison cage. He snatched for support, caught a crossbar, thrust out a rubbery arm to fend Jim's follow-up rush that was ready with left and right to drill home the finishers.

He was groggy-eyed, defenseless. Jim cocked his elbow—

"Stand back!" shrilled a voice. "Hold it—steady—get your hands up!"

The deputy lost his grip and slid to the floor. He sprawled with outstretched legs and lolling head, with one shoulder slumped against the bars that caged the Hammock killer.

He had dangled long enough, however, for the prisoner to snake an unseen hand through the grille and filch the pistol from his holster. It was the prisoner who had shouted, and he backed his commands with a gun-snout aimed for Jim's belly.

Chapter II

RED'S BOY

JIM MELLODY reached for altitude. The prisoner's voice might be nervously shrill, but no buck fever jiggled the muzzle he was tilting.

"Turn around," came the order, and Jim meekly turned. "You there, skinny—" this was to Andy—"push your face to the wall and keep it there. . . . You other one back towards me."

Jim backed. He halted beside the punch-dazed deputy, and a hand captured his hip-sheathed Colt's. Crisp commands directed him in the use of Mule-Face's ring of keys, and now the Hammock killer was stepping from his cell with a gun in either fist. He motioned Jim to hug the wall with Andy.

Vern Hatfield was his name, and Jim would not forget him. He was young, dressed like a townsman, and his features had the same chiseled regularity that Jim had envied in Mart Lansing. Mart was the taller size, of course, and fair where this fellow was dark, but they shared the looks

that women call handsome and grudging men call pretty.

But the set of his face wasn't pretty now. Curled lips, bared hard-clenched teeth, and the pump of his breath whispered the silence. He backed warily towards the corridor.

"Much obliged," he said softly.

"There's just one thing, mister," said Jim. "Don't lock that other door behind—don't coop us here. We gave you your break—"

"I didn't shoot old Ben-John," said Hatfield, wild-eyed. "I was framed—I didn't know what I was saying. It's a put-up job, and I know the name of the scheming devil behind it. . . . Stand back—don't move—"

He was gone from sight. Jim glanced at Andy Weaver, shaking his head, and soon they heard a clink of key, a squeak, the thud of the outer portal.

"He's locked us in!" Andy breathed. "He's crazy. He can't get away—"

"Our big friend's horse is hitched in the shade outside," said Jim. "He can make a run for it, anyhow."

"And it's all my drunken fault," Andy groaned. "Hell Jim, go on and kill me."

Jim didn't answer but sprang into the jailhouse office. The stolen keys had been left in the lock, and he wasted precious seconds to make sure that Mule-Face wouldn't come pelting after them.

"He's hopped the horse and gone, Jim," called Andy from the window. "The street looks clear."

"We walk out, Andy," Jim told him. "We stroll away as if nothin' happened. The stable's just across the road, and I gave orders to have our horses ready. C'mon—"

And us without even a slingshot if they should start shootin'," said Andy. "I swear I'll never touch another drop of no-good whiskey."

The single thoroughfare of the sleepy town still dozed in the sun as they emerged. A knot of figures had collected near the store porch down the way, but this distant interest was chiefly curious. Andy heaved a grateful sigh at the sight of his saddled chestnut switching flies outside the stable.

They were half across the roadway, thirty feet to go, when a muffled voice loosed a bellow from the jailhouse.

"On the run!" Jim cried. "Straight west, Andy. There's a rifle in my saddle boot if they get too crowdy!"

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THERE was one shot behind them as they fogged a straightway quarter-mile. A lone shot—but no pursuit. When they reached the broken country they still had sighted no sign of a chase. Jim tossed the deputy's keys into a creek, and slowed his newly-traded horse for a breather.

If that two-bit crossroads settlement had a name, he didn't care to know it. That tough deputy-marshal would be Mule-Face to him forevermore. It was bad business back there, but only second guess could have avoided it.

"Confound his thick skull," Jim muttered. "That stableman knows I'm from the Heelfly. The brand on the spent horse I traded will be proof. First Mart leads a bunch in to raise a ruckus, then I come along and turn a killer loose. Big Red will skin me alive when he gets back from Colorado."

"I know it's my fault," said Andy. "How much was the cost to bail me out?"

Jim shook his head. "But what else could I do? It's all the more reason, I suppose, to cut 'er swift for Hangtown. The sooner we get there—" he kneed his mount—"the fewer posses we'll have to dodge."

"Whatever the amount was," said Andy, "you can take it out of my pay. Honest, Jim, I'm sorry."

Jim glared at him. "What I'd like to do is whale it out of Mart. Howcome he set out in the first place? He knew I'd be back next day. Why didn't some of you others have half-witted brains enough—"

He loosed a string of language that scoured the wrath from his throat. He thought of Big Red Lansing, of the grievous hurt already done and the harm that still might be; and the knowledge that Big Red depended on him was a sobering balance.

For all that Jim Mellody had, all that he was or might ever become, was mortgaged to Big Red. There was a twenty-year debt that ran back to a day when a struggling foothills rancher adopted an orphan stray. Red Lansing had prospered mightily since—Lucky Lansing, he'd been

nicknamed—and now he was grooming that erstwhile stray, Jim Mellody, to succeed him as boss of his empire.

Not his own son—not Mart. Mart was too flighty, too harum-scarum, and Big Red had long since pronounced that his other boy, Jim, would one day fill the bossman's boots. He had saddled Jim with responsibilities, tested him in emergencies, and finally had named him the Heelfly segundo over wiser and steadier and more seasoned men.

That was why, returning to headquarters yesterday from a long inspection trip, he'd been hit such a blow by the news. Old Con Regan, who kept the books, had greeted him with stuttery excitement. Late in the previous afternoon, according to Con, a messenger had pelted in with a tale of disaster. A trail crew from one of the feeder ranches had hit a jackpot of trouble in Hangtown, and the net result was three Heelfly hands shot dead and four more suffering gun-wounds. Among the dead was old Billy MacCumber who had bossed the drive to the rail-head. They not only killed old Billy, but they also managed to rob from him the twelve thousand dollars he'd collected for his shipment.

Damn Mart Lansing and all his reckless, headstrong, fire eating stripe! Would Mart listen to Con Regan or Pegleg—no! Would he wait a single hour—no! Nothing would do but gun up and ride. Seven of the Heelfly's best had trailed forth for settlement, with Mart ramrodding the party.

"How come you all started drinkin' back there?" Jim said to Andy.

"Well, we mainly stopped for a bite of grub. Mart said he'd stand the drinks, though—"

"I know, I know. Did Con have the number right—eight of you?"

"There was fo'teen before I dropped out," Andy said sheepishly. "Mart got to drinkin' and talkin', you see, and there was some fellows in the saloon. . . . Mart said he'd pay three dollars a day."

Fury choked Jim's voice an instant but he managed to control himself. "Cleaned out the upstairs safe before he left," he said. "Had to flash his money around, I reckon, and tell the world how big he was. . . . And what in hell did he have in mind that he needed to hire barroom drunks to help him."

"Well, he—I guess he was talkin', that's all. I don't expect he meant it."

"Meant what?"

"Now look, Jim, it ain't *my* fault. He's Red's boy—"

"Damn you, Andy, what's he up to?"

Andy wagged his head. "I see now how crazy it is, but I swear I didn't while Mart talked it. He swore, Jim, that he'd hang the men who killed old Billy and them others. He'd hire a hunnerd gunhands, he said, if that's how many was needed, and burn Hangtown to the ground if them Holy Joes didn't like it."

Chapter III

HELL TRAP

A RACING steed on a level track can pound out thirty miles in a little more than a hundred minutes. But not those thirty crow-flight miles to Hangtown.

There were timbered steeps and roughs to skirt, trackless stretches with only the sun to steer by, and dark was in the sky when two leg-weary horses descended to the level of the Longhorn Cutoff with journey's end still half an hour distant. They had traipsed and meandered so that now the town lay north instead of westward, but anyhow they'd made it. Better late than never, and here they were a-knocking at the door. . . .

Jim slid down to cool his saddle and give his legs a final limber. He poured a cigarette and passed the makings to Andy, and for a little they smoked in thoughtful silence.

Jim had simmered down considerably. The jolts of the trail and the slap of the brush had helped to allay his fears. There surely would be some way to explain the accident that had set a killer free. Mart's threats had probably been no more than his liquor boasting, and perhaps the whole affair was peaceably settled by now. He sure hoped so.

And if it wasn't—if the horizon suddenly spouted smoke or the distance rumbled to gunfire—well, how could he have prevented it? Worry was solitaire for fools, Big Red had often stated, and fret or fluster worked no miracles. If the worst had already happened, if the fat was sizzling, he would

need his calmest judgment to make the best of it.

"Right here's the way old Billy drove them cattle to the rails," said Andy. "He shipped from the Junction, didn't he?"

Jim nodded. "Accordin' to Con's headquarters' records the stock was two-year-old feeders, choice to prime. Sold to some independent buyer for part cash at the loading pens and the balance on delivery to the Midwest Yards. The reason for cash was that we'd never dealt with this buyer before."

"I wish I could remember more," said Andy, "of the story that Rafe Ludlum had to tell. It was all such a flurry when Rafe rode in, ever'body hollerin' at once—"

"I know," said Jim. "It's all right, Andy. I'd like to get it as clear as we can, though, before we make this last jump in. Try it again from the start. Maybe I can listen better now that my temper's cooled off."

"Well," said Andy, "the best I recall was that Billy started up the trail with four of his own punchers and some extras hired on. They had some trouble at the Snake River crossin', a run that almost got away, and Billy must taken this cutoff to make up lost time. Hangtown didn't like it, of course, and a squabble brewed."

Jim wagged his head. Hangtown had always been a queer and touchy community. Some religious colony had originally settled the place, and for years they hadn't allowed saloons there. A few herds of cattle grazed the foothills, but plowland and freighting were the chief local enterprises.

The Longhorn Cutoff, skirting the westward reaches of the town, was a natural passageway between the two main routes to the head of steel. The early trail-drivers, bound for Dodge or Abilene, had charted it as a mile-saver through the neighboring *malpais*. But the Hangtowners had never hankered for the drovers' trade—more bother than it was worth—and had set out to divert it.

With one thing and another—ordinances and petty fines, water blockades and fence-post barriers—they had harried the longhorn traffic into steering shy. Pitched battles had been fought nearby in the heyday of the trade, and one wild outfit had even chased a stampede down the town's main drag. Six dead Texans were the upshot of that, and the bodies had been strung as warnings along the lower trail. This had happened years ago, of course, but many a cowman still coupled an oath with mention of the Hangtown name. . . .

"But the real ruckus held off," said Andy, "until Billy had shipped the beef and come back. He mebbe expected some difficulty, for he still had three of his extra hands along. He camped the boys out west of town and rode in solo after supper. He got back around ten, hoppin' mad. Rafe had no chance to learn what was up—none of 'em did—for the next dang minnit these skunks started shootin'."

"It don't make sense," Jim said angrily. "Billy wouldn't hunt a fight. What would he need extra hands for when the straight road home would taken him twelve miles wide of Hangtown? You mean to tell me—"

"It ain't my story," said Andy. "All I know is what Rafe Ludlum said. I got the notion that the cattle might've tromped some cropfields passin' through, mebbe busted some fences, and Billy stopped by to pay off damages. They might tried to hold him up for a fancy price, or somehow seen what a roll he carried—"

"It's crazy," said Jim.

"I guess it was," Andy solemnly agreed. "Seven of 'em there in camp, and all of a sudden this ambush bunch poured the bullets amongst 'em. Rafe was the luckiest—a scratch on the arm was all he got—and he managed to crawl off in the dark. He hid till it was over."

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JIM threw his cigarette away. He stretched, and the gray dusk shadowed his features with a mingle of anger and uncertainty. He waited patiently, however, while Andy repeated the rest of his second-hand account.

The attackers had numbered a dozen or more, according to Rafe Ludlum. They had shot ruthlessly, aiming to kill, and Jug and Charley must have been downed by the opening fusillade. Billy and the extra hands tried to fight back, but the odds were too heavy. When the cannonade was over, when the night had quieted and Rafe could sneak into camp again—

"Jug and Charley were dead," said Andy. "They'd emptied a pistol into old Billy and turned his pockets inside out. The

extras had saved themselves by takin' to the brush, but not a one escaped without hurt. They naturally didn't know what to do, and it wasn't till next morning they got organized. Since they couldn't recognize nobody, nor explain any reason why strangers should jump 'em, they got no satisfaction from the Hangtown law. Their last bet left was to send Rafe into headquarters for orders."

"Yeah, yeahs," said Jim. "But I still don't like the smell of it. We got to do somethin' sure. Big Red's first law has always been that the Heelfly stands back of its men, and we can't let anybody get away with barefaced murder."

"That's what Mart said."

"I know. But first we want to make certain sure that the murder was barefaced. We got to know positive who done it, and why. And last of all we got to see that the killers are handed to the law to face their punishment."

"Law!" Andy echoed.

"The rightful law," said Jim. "Red Lansing's too big to do otherwise. He swings too much money and power to play bull in the china shop. He'd rather take a bullet himself than smear any bigfist smirch on the Heelfly."

"Smirch?" said Andy. "I don't see that."

"Can I pick a fight with a half-pint boy?" Jim demanded. "Red's got too many enemies now, especially in crooked politics, to set his own law above that of the average man. He's got too much to lose—you savvy, Andy?"

"Well, I—well, yeah, in a way."

"Then c'mon," said Jim. "Now here's how we'll manage—"

He talked as they rode. If luck was with them—if Mart Lansing hadn't yet found time to muddle the predicament—he foresaw no unnatural difficulties. The Heelfly war party would probably be bivouacked nearby, and Andy's task was to hunt the camp and spread the peaceful tidings.

"Grab hold of Mart," Jim said grimly, "and muzzle him."

"But where'll I start? Dark and all, how'll I find 'em?"

"Smell 'em out," said Jim. "Prowl with your eyes peeled and your ears cocked."

"But where you goin' 'midst all this?"

"I'm ridin' straight in. The sooner we know the inside of this layout, the quicker we'll clear it up. There must be some responsible men in Hangtown who I can talk turkey to."

"I dunno," said Andy. "I wouldn't trust these Holy Joes. Suppose they talk you the same kind of turkey they fed to Billy MacCumber?"

"I'll handle it," Jim assured him. He issued various other instructions, and when the lights of Hangtown came into distant view they rode apart.

"If you can't find trail of 'em," Jim said in parting, "come on into town. I'll leave word at that big hotel where you can locate me."

"All right," said Andy doubtfully. "Whatever you say. The least thing I cherish, though, is ridin' loose by dark in strangers' country."

A sliver of moon was a misty splotch in the west, and the stir of the wind was warm. A blob of light glowed from an outlying structure some few hundred yards beyond, and Jim thought of Billy MacCumber as he cantered towards it. Old Billy with his stringy mustache and lopsided grin. Billy had a gentle voice for spinning yarns, a deep-bodied laugh that was full of music, and there wasn't a better cow-boss in the Territories. Big Red would take it hard when he heard what happened to Billy.

Wait a minute! What had become of that light ahead? . . . Jim slowed his mount and his eyes tried to pierce the sooty dimness. A fringe of scrub ran a fence at his left, and now he spied the loom of sheds and a barn. Might be best to ride on past—

"Stand that hoss!" came the gruff command. "Keep 'im covered, boys! Who the devil are you there, and where you think you're headed?"

Half a dozen horsemen converged from the shadows. Wary men, rifle-armed, and what was amiss that the open trail should be guarded. The back of Jim's neck felt a tingle of premonition.

He lifted a hand in peaceful sign. "Pilgrim ridin' in," he called. "What's all the commotion?"

A big bearded fellow rode close, and the muzzle of his weapon poked at Jim's chest. "We'll ask the questions, pilgrim," he said. "Light that lantern, Jake, and let's take a look at this prize package."

The lantern's shine revealed hard-bitten faces. A second rider crowded up, reached to take the carbine from Jim's saddle boot. Jim knocked his hand away.

"What goes on here?" he exclaimed. "Mellody's my name—Jim Mellody from the Heelfly ranch. I want to see—"

Rage twisted the features of the man whose grasp he had fended. He grunted an oath, and as his spurred horse danced closer he clubbed the barrel of his rifle at Jim's face. Jim reined aside. His forearm averted the clumsy blow, but the glancing force of the stroke was bone-numbing. Shouts raised, and hands snatched, and the bearded leader leaned in with a grizzly hug that pinioned Jim's arms. A surge of weight wrestled them both to earth.

"Git hold of Tom!" the leader cried. "Keep that devil off, you hear!"

"Heelfly!" Tom was raging. "Lemme at 'im, boys. I'll kill 'im with my two bare fists. Lefty was my brother, damn it, and Dan Whitlow was my friend. Leggo—lemme at 'im!"

"There's some mistake," Jim panted. "You got the wrong man. I came here peaceful—"

"Somebody hand me a rope," boomed the bearded man. "Peaceful, huh? We'll show you peace, by God! You call it peaceful for drunken hoodlums to shoot among an unarmed crowd? There was two good boys left bloody on the street when your Heelfly helled from town today, and if they die we'll hang ten Heelflies for each of 'em."

"That's shoutin', Blackie. String 'im up right here and now. Let Tom noose the rope on 'im."

"No, boys," said Blackie. "I promised Pat Yeager we'd try it his way, square and legal. We'll take 'im in to Pat—"

A figure darted at him. The man called Tom had dismounted and eluded friendly restraints. He was sobbing with rage, and he smashed a blow to the face that staggered Jim from Blackie's grip.

Jim was reeled back against Blackie's snorting, shying horse. He was pawing for support, and accidentally clutched his fingers to the pommel of the kak. The horse

bumped the mount of the man who held the lantern, and somebody in the group picked that certain instant to loose a random bullet.

Next instant Blackie's horse was buck-jumping the clamorous dark with Jim Mellody hunched in the saddle.

Chapter IV

MAMMOCK CRAVES BLOOD

BLACKIE'S horse plunged on the prod. They bumped another wheeling cayuse, and a shot exploded so close to Jim's neck that he felt the sting of detonation. He ripped away from reaching hands, whirled a blind punch that emptied a saddle, and then they were charging clear.

Yell and thrash and *wham-wham-wham.* Give that crazy horse his head, and ramble, brother, ramble. . . . The night was sightless, and Jim's chief impression for a little while was that he was lashed to a cockleshell boat that bucked a roaring river through a dungeon cavern. The bluster of gunfire punctuated the din of voice and movement, and it seemed like hours before those sounds began to ebb and scatter behind him. His next clear realization was a slackening of speed.

The stride of Blackie's horse was faltering. Now a limp, now a stagger, now a wavering veer against the rein. The beast gave a great sigh of breath as Jim hopped clear, then weaved a few erratic paces and collapsed.

The blood that smeared Jim's boot was not his own; one of those frenzied shots back there had hit the runaway target.

Jim splayed a hand across his face. He tried to think, to listen, but his boots were running him away. He stumbled a hillock, waded brush, covered murky distance. In a wooded clump he fell to earth, a spent fox burrowing in the safety of darkness.

The sigh of that horse—the thick body shuddering. . . . Jim Mellody forking Death's last ride when Death was his greatest fear, his eternal foe. The sight or smell of lifelessness was a dread he could not conquer, and senseless panic assailed him briefly now. It was a weakness that traced back twenty years to the renegade looting of a Willow Wells wagon train. The lone survivor of seventeen had been a shock-brained five-year-old, an orphan stray who Big Red Lansing adopted.

His flurry was soon controlled. Thinking of Big Red, of the debt he owed, was always a source of strength to Jim, The night was his shelter and his friend, and he huddled in its protection while the horsemen charged past. Two searchers halted within a stone's throw, and Jim learned that he had probably circled wide and fled from town. Extra patrols were being summoned, and searchers were hunting the Heelfly camp. Pat Yeager had sixty men mounted and armed, and a full round hundred would be ready to wipe those hellions out as soon as Pat passed the order.

What sensible move could he possibly make except to sit tight and save his own neck? What could any one man do except pray that Mart Lansing might skeedaddle with the night, or that dawn would bring better sense to Hangtown?

If he could manage to steal a horse—if Andy Weaver had dodged the guards and somehow stumbled into Mart's hideaway—

But damn the ifs! It was push, not prayers, that Big Red depended on from him. He came erect and his decision was grimly forming. Pat Yeager—that was the name! Pat Yeager was the man who must be converted to the peaceful gospel.

They were hunting Jim Mellody roundabout, and the town would not expect him. His face was unknown and the dark would cloak him. He'd find this Pat Yeager somehow another, and convince him that the peace pipe was always a better smoke than the pistol.

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A RAIN barrel behind a barn removed the smear that Tom's fist had plastered on him. A corner of his mouth was gashed, a lip was swelling, and these were other small items on the account he had to settle with Mart Lansing. Add an aching forearm, a bruised knee, a hat and a rifle and a Colt's revolver lost, and that was just the loose change in the tally.

He ghosted into Hangtown by a rear

approach that edged fenced fields and finally prowled the sheds and rubbish heaps of a gloomy alley. Between buildings he could spy the traffic and the goings on of Market Street, the main drag, and the evening's tone had the snarly buzz of an overturned beehive. The Holy Joes seemed primed and loaded for bear meat.

A shadowed patch outside the Commerce Hotel was his first listening post. He glided on to overhear the discussion on the porch of the Mercantile Store, and later he hovered on the fringes of talkative groups in Courthouse Square and at the wagon yard of the Prairie Stage. The dual topics of the night were Major John-Ben Logan's murder and the Heelfly-Hangtown war, and patience eventually winnowed the local gist of these events.

The Congress Hotel was arguing the cause of hostilities. One man said that it looked to him like another of Red Lansing's highhanded outrages. Big Red might have had a grudge against somebody in the town, and might sent his men deliberate to pick a quarrel. Why else would MacCumber have pushed his herd through the cutoff with never a by-your-leave? Maybe them Hellflies—that was the better name for 'em—had only been following orders when they let their cattle overrun the farmlands north. Maybe they'd purposely egged those hoemen into a shooting skirmish.

Another maintained, however, that this was nonsense. The drive-through had been arranged with Major Ben-John Logan, he said, and the skirmish was chiefly misunderstanding. Everything was aboveboard until MacCumber came back with a kink in his tail and refused to pay his honest damage. That business of unknown riders jumping his camp sounded mighty fishy, but if they did whose fault was it? If MacCumber hadn't been gunning for a scrap he'd have taken the straight road home. If he hadn't been hunting a ruckus he'd have paid off his extra hands at the Junction. No, sir, no matter what happened, that drunken, foul-mouthed, gun-loose cowpoke bunch got no more than they asked for.

The Mercantile Store was trying to accuse the Heelfly of having some hand in Major Ben-John's murder. It was known that Billy MacCumber had seen the Major early on the murder night, and the Major's girl might have been mistaken in thinking their confab was friendly. The Major wasn't shot until some time near midnight, of course, and MacCumber's camp was supposed to have been attacked two hours earlier, but there may have been some trick in it.

Maybe Vern Hatfield hadn't shot the Major after all. Vern was crazy with the whiskey in him, and he certainly was drunk that night, but that boy didn't look like the killer kind. He'd yelled a lot of threats when Ben-John ordered him from the house after supper, and twenty men could swear that he'd tried to borrow a gun, but it might have been no more than steam he was letting off. He might very well have passed out harmlessly somewheres as he claimed he did.

Looked bad for him, though, despite the way the Major's girl stuck up for him. Even Pat Yeager's backing wouldn't help him much unless he could dig up some proof. With the way Ben-John's office had been ransacked, and Vern known to be so desperate for cash to pay his gambling debts. . . .

In Courthouse Square bottles were passing from hand to hand, and every other figure toted a shotgun or rifle. The tone was bitter here, and the consensus was that everything else could go to pot until the Hellflies had been swatted once for all.

There were grumblings against Pat Yeager, the town marshal. Pat was trying to pussyfoot when the time called for action. He'd investigated the shooting at MacCumber's camp, but the tracks were so jumbled that there wasn't much to be told. Pat was certain, anyhow, that no local men were involved. Maybe some hell they'd raised up the line had finally caught up with 'em. Hammock had treated 'em fair and square—even digging a pit for decent burial—and today was a good example of how decency was repaid.

That drunk-mouthed young whippersnapper, Red Lansing's whelp, riding in as if he owned the town. Him and his dozen gunhands yowling up the street and swaggering into the Overland. Strutting up to Pat Yeager, that pink-faced Lansing squirt, and slapping his holster and shaking a lass-rope.

Twenty-four hours, huh, for Hammock to produce the men who killed MacCumber and his boys? Balling his fist in the marshal's face, and telling Pat to trot 'em out or the Hellflies would come and get 'em. Boasting what a he-wolf his daddy was, and how we'd see him next time with fifty smokepoles behind him.

Who could stomach such talk as that? Another man but Pat might lost his head and rammed the bluff down Lansing's gullet. No wonder some of the boys made remarks as they rode from town, proud as turkey cocks. But was that good cause for those blood-crazy sons to ride their quirts into a crowd? What difference was it who shot first?

Jim moved along. He edged the rear of the courthouse, straddled a fence, and a split between buildings brought him close to the loading yard of the Prairie Stage. He halted near a stack of bales, and new voices resumed the wordy defiance.

Fight was what the Hellflies wanted, and Hammock would see that they got their fill of it. All Red Lansing's ill-gotten dollars couldn't hire hoodlums enough to back his son's highhanded bulldozing. The county sheriff wasn't needed, nor troops from Fort Mandan as some fools advised. Hammock had the guns and the men to protect its own, and tomorrow's noontime deadline would either see the Hellfly eating crow or fattening up the buzzards. Red Lansing would learn that no cattle king was big enough—

"You, there!" called a gruff voice.

"That's him," said shriller tones. "I been watchin' him sneak this past half hour. He's there beside the hay bales."

Jim's interest had been so intent upon the conversational group near the stage station that he was caught flat-footed. The challenge came from the dim passage behind him, and the move of figures there blocked rearward getaway. Ahead was the bustle and light of Market Street—

"You with no hat on," the gruff voice insisted, and Jim thought he recognized big Blackie's harsh accents. "Step out and show yourself—"

Jim ran. He crouched into a rabbit-hump and launched himself towards the jawing knot of eight or ten who stood at the corner of the building. And he yelled as he ran.

The boom of a shot gave him wings. He rammed among that bewildered group as they turned, and his shout was a garble of panic: "Heelfly—they're comin'! Scatter—shoot—run!"

Another shot blurted from the passage, loud cries babbled, and abruptly men were darting every whichway like a covey of quail.

"Grab 'im—shoot 'im!" Blackie yowled. "It's him—it's the same—that spy for the Heelfly!"

Chapter V

SUNDAY SCHOOL OR SLAUGHTER?

AGAIN the night was Jim's protection. Guns had no target in that flurried dark, and pursuit was a shadow chase. A dozen men were scampering in every compass direction, and the quarry might have been any one of them.

There was twenty feet of lighted space to cross—the front of the stage office—and Jim scooted across. They were still chasing phantoms behind him as he ghosted into the open of the adjoining yard. The hubbub rose, and he hugged a wagon's shadow while men scurried past from the stables beyond, drawn by the uproar.

He crossed an alley, scuttled a brushy field, and the noises dwindled. Ahead were the lights of residences, and he drifted towards them. He scouted a placid tree-lined street of homes. Yellow windows and picket fences and horses drowsing yonder between buggy shafts. If he could get hold of a horse—

But reason cautioned him to lay low a while. Since there was no better place to go he returned to the back lots and hunkered in the lee of a carriage shed.

He had picked up a three-foot length of wood in his travels and his fingers squeezed it. A weapon, any kind of weapon, was courage in a man's fist.

For a little while, until his heart thumps abated and his breath stopped wheezing, he couldn't think clearly. He was full of blankness, and when he rested his head on his arm he seemed to be in some far-away space with only pinpoint stars for company.

After a while he could hear the sound of cantering hoofs cutting across the back

lots and turning into the street above. They slowed as they approached the house that fronted Jim's hiding, and though he could not see them plainly he could hear the carry of voices. There were three men, and the first to speak was the bearded Blackie:

"How do I know what to do?" he said. "How can I tell where he might've gone to? Pat Yeager's in charge, ain't he? Well, let Pat decide it."

"I wouldn't butt in on 'im now, Blackie," said a milder voice. "Poor Pat ain't had no rest since the Major was killed. Give 'im time enough, anyhow, to pay his respects at the wake."

"Respects!" Blackie snorted. "Are we fightin' snakes or sittin' in Sunday School? There's somethin' queerish goin' on, I tell you, or why else would that scoundrel ride in so bold and admit he was from the Heelfly? What was he up to there at the stage yard? How do we know how many more might sneaked into town, ready to climb our backs when the signal's given? What's to keep Mart Lansing from jumpin' his deadline and ridin' his bunch into here right now?"

"You're crazy," said the other. "He ain't got the men for it, Pat says. If he ever sobers up, Pat claims, he's more likely to ride off home and fergit it."

"Buck's right," said a third voice. "Pat'll be through at the Major's soon, and we can just as well wait at his office. I happen to know he's got partic'lar business in hand just now. They're talkin' things over in that side porch parlor—him and the Major's girl."

Blackie muttered an oath. "I don't care if he's bigwiggin' Grover Cleveland. I'm goin' up there—"

"You'd care," said the mild voice, "if you'd been crazy for a woman as long as Pat has been for the Major's girl. He never stood a chance before, not with Vern Hatfield around, but now—"

They rode up the street, still arguing, and Jim crept forward to watch. There was a lighted porch four houses up, and a file of buggies fronted it. Blackie's trio halted near a hitched saddle horse, then continued on as figures emerged upon the porch.

Jim drew a deep breath.

Pat Yeager!

TRELLISED vines draped the little porch. The shade-drawn windows emitted feeble slants of light. The voices from within were a murmur as indistinct as the sigh of the wind, the viny rustle.

As he flattened himself beside the porch he wondered: Was this door unlocked? Were the two of them alone in there?

A chair scraped. A man cleared his throat, and the sound of his deep tones came distinctly. "Well, I—I reckon I got to go. I guess you know I'll do all I can, Geneva. I won't try to say how sorry I am—"

A woman made some soft reply.

"I'll somehow clear it up," he said, "when this other trouble simmers down. The more I look into things the less I think Vern done it."

She sobbed. "Oh, Pat—" she cried. "What can I do to help him. I know that dad never trusted Vern—I know how reckless Vern could be—but I never will believe—"

Was she in the marshal's arms? Was she sobbing her woes to his shoulder? Yeager mumbled broken words, and in a moment she spoke almost normally.

"I'm sorry, Pat. I shouldn't—perhaps you'd better go. But when you've loved somebody as long as I've loved Vern—"

"Yeah," said Yeager. "Yeah, I know. I—that is—I suspect the boys will be lookin' for me."

The door came open, a tall shape loomed, Yeager was turning for a brief farewell—

Jim stepped fast. Two stiffened fingers stabbed the Hangtown marshal's side.

"I don't want to kill you, Yeager," Jim breathed. "Steady does it!"

Chapter VI

RETURN OF THE KILLER

HE PULLED the desperation bluff, the ancient pistol-finger dodge, and miraculously it worked. He was inside, he had snatched Pat Yeager's holster gun, he had closed the door and backed against it. His captured gun-snout wavered between a Roman-nosed man with lifted hands and a dark girl, darkly dressed, who covered her lips with fearful fingers.

She hadn't screamed, and that was Jim's

stroke of luck. It wasn't resistance from Yeager he had feared—no sensible man will argue a rib-tickle drop—but a yip from a scary woman might have brought the house down on him.

He spoke fast, and instinct directed his words to the girl. "Don't be frightened, ma'am. I mean no harm to anybody. Jim Mellody's my name—from the Heelfly Ranch—and all I want is to spike this trouble before it runs any further."

He took a long chance. He deliberately lowered the pistol.

"I'm actin' for Big Red Lansing," he said. "Mart Lansing's a yap-mouthed fool, and lives have already been risked by his foolishness. The quickest way to see that no more are dangered is for you and me to put our heads together, Yeager."

The Hangtown marshal studied him with keen dark eyes. Pat Yeager was a barrel-chested husky with a pleasantly homely face and with hard capability stamped upon him. If Jim was any judge of human brands—which he sometimes wasn't—here was a man of strength and will and savvy.

"I'm listenin'," said Yeager.

"All I want is a chance to get to Mart before more harm is done," said Jim. "I can settle this pronto once I put my hands on him. Will you sign a truce till I hunt him down?"

"Truce?" Yeager's jaw squared. "I all but begged 'im on my knees not to start this trouble. How long a truce did you have in mind, mister? Long enough, mebbe, for Lansing to fetch up the killers he's gone to hire in Flat Rock and Windigo? Long enough for more riders to join 'im from the Skillet and the LIG?"

"You got to trust me," said Jim.

Yeager looked at the girl. She hadn't moved from her seat on the sofa—a pretty girl, young and fresh-featured and shapely made. Her fright had faded as Jim spoke, and now quick interest put a lively shine in her eyes. Yeager had backed protectively towards her when Jim forced him inside, and now she rose and put her hand on the marshal's arm.

"All I know, Pat," she said, "is what dad used to say. I've heard him tell many a time that Red Lansing's word was his bond. Dad and Billy MacCumber sometimes argued—"

"I just want to be sure," said Jim, "that your townfolks don't crowd the play. There was talk that you were huntin' Mart's camp and that guns would turn loose if you struck it. You put a spoke in that idea, Yeager, and I'll tend to the rest of it."

Yeager peered at him long and thoughtfully. "All right," he said suddenly, "it's a deal." His lips almost framed a grin. "And I don't mind tellin' you, Mellody, that I'm doggone relieved to make it. I was beginnin' to worry—"

Genteel taps pecked at the hallway door. A woman called that Dr. Harrison wanted to see Geneva.

"Now's your turn to trust us," said Yeager. "She'll keep this under her hat though, won't you, Geneva?"

"To show how I feel about it—" said Jim. He smiled at the girl and placed the marshal's gun on the center table. . . .

"Sit down a minnit," said Yeager, when she was gone. "If you're on the level—and I think you are—we can clean up this mare's nest in a hurry. Things got away from me here, I guess, and I couldn't quite see how to clamp the lid on 'em. Shootin'

them two boys on the street set the whole town afire. A hundred men crowded outside my office to be deputized for a shoot-down posse, and I was mighty close to leadin' 'em."

"You'd been within the law," said Jim.

Yeager shook his head. "There'd been too many killed. Tempers flared so high though, that I had to scare 'em out of it. I told how there might be fifty more Hellflies out in the roughs, and that our best bet was to organize to protect ourselves. I deputized a bunch, rounded up guns and ammunition, threw out some guards and scoutin' parties—"

"So I found out," said Jim. "I'll tell the tale directly."

"I couldn't hardly believe, of course," said Yeager, "that young Lansing would back his bluff. I thought it was his likker talkin', and tomorrow would find him cooled considerable. This ain't the Sudden Sixties any more, and his father's too important a man. But when I learned he'd set out to hire extra guns—well, I'd been ready for him."

"Mart's a curious critter," said Jim. "He gets his pride and ambitions all mixed up. But how'd you know what he was plannin'—hirin' toughs from Windigo and expectin' help from the LIG?"

"I had him trailed from town," said Yeager. "I got three men watchin' his layout right now. He's camped at the old shack village on Ramrod Butte, some ten miles south by west. Follow Ramrod Crick and you can't miss it. He had twenty-odd men by the last account, and four-five women they'd picked up somewheres. He left around sundown to roundup more recruits and send back another barrel of whiskey."

Jim's lips thinned and anger contracted his brows. "It must been quite a temptation, Marshal."

Yeager nodded. "A dozen well-placed guns, so the boys claim, could wipe 'em off the map. I might've gone out and made myself a considerable reputation. . . . You got a horse handy?"

"Unh-uh—I figured—"

"Mine's standin' right outside. Straight across town is the quickest way out. Dave Robbins is in charge of my scouts, and I'll fix some signal of truce with him—"

His voice was bitten off. Expression was blanked from his face as he stared across Jim's shoulder. Jim glanced quickly—

The porch door had opened soundlessly. A crouching figure was gliding in, and a jutted gun was warning and command.

"I knew damn' well where I'd find you," Vern Hatfield breathed. "Making up to her already, huh? I knew you wouldn't take long to sneak in behind me. But let's see how far you'll sneak when I've emptied this in your belly!"

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HE WAS hog-wild.

He may have found some bravemaker along his flight of escape, or perhaps it was sheer murder-lust that possessed him.

"I'll never get away," he said. "You framed me so damn' slick, Yeager, that I'm as good as dead. But I won't mind going to hell so much when I know you're waiting there for me."

"Put down that gun, Vern," the marshal said softly. "You're off your head, boy. I'm your friend."

His eyes flicked towards the center table in a signal that Jim understood. The lamp, not the pistol. A six-foot leap for the weapon would have been an idiot's risk, but if Yeager could distract attention for another minute or so—

"Go ahead," said Vern Hatfield. "Try some little stunt. . . . Step over there, you, and keep your hands up. And you, my friend, put your back to the mantel."

It was clear that he had not recognized Jim as his accidental means of breaking jail that afternoon. The dimness of the cell block and Jim's present bedraggled condition might explain it, or perhaps his desperation had no interest beyond the object of his murder-hunt. Jim was partially turned away, and as he moved obediently sidewise he dropped his left hand to his chest. His shoulder hid the action—or at least he hoped it did.

"Yes, you're my fine friend," Hatfield whispered. "You're my double-crossing friend, Pat Yeager, who's always hated my guts. Do you think I've never seen how you looked at Geneva? You've wanted her for years, you clumsy clown, and maybe you thought you'd stand a chance with me

pushed out of your way. With me and the Major both—two birds with one stone, eh?"

Sweat stood out on the marshal's face. "You're cracked, Vern," he said. "I don't believe you killed 'im. I'm on your side, boy—"

Jim's left hand was moving slowly. Now his fingers had crept to the buckle of his cartridge belt.

Hatfield grunted:

"You've done your best to hang me," he said with a bitter oath. "I've had the time to think it out, Yeager, and now I see how you schemed. Even if I drank and gambled myself out of Geneva's picture, you knew damn' well that her daddy would never marry her to a common hired gunhand. But if you could manage to get rid of the pair of us—"

Jim had unfastened the prong of the buckle. It would be an awkward stroke, left-handed, whipping the belt around in a loaded lash at the light, but no other possible move was as good a gamble.

But he couldn't strike, not yet. He had to see the look that accusal brought to Pat Yeager's eyes. How could he tell whether young Vern Hatfield was desperately deranged or terribly sane?

He hesitated, and that was his bad mistake.

"You found a chance that was made to order," Vern Hatfield breathlessly charged. "I got drunk, yes. I stormed the major's house to get money I needed—money that was mine—money he held as executor of my father's estate. He refused me, sure—he threatened he'd have you arrest me—and so I made my whisky threats. But I didn't kill—"

"You'll hang for sure if you shoot me, Vern," said Yeager. "Don't do it—save yourself for Geneva's sake. I swear that I can clear it up—"

"Sure you can, Pat, for *you* killed him!"

An instant's silence shivered the room.

"I can't prove it to the law," Vern Hatfield said tensely. "I was staggering off somewhere, sleeping it off in some alley maybe, and you can probably alibi every minute of the evening. But I know you murdered him. You knew Geneva would be away. You ransacked the office and then you shot him. You stole what money he had to make it look bad for me. And that's why I'm killing you now, Pat Yeager, without a prayer. . . ."

What was the matter with Jim Mellody's hand and brain? Why didn't he sling that cartridge-studded leather in a blinding slash and prevent the tragedy?

"I started for the owl-hoot roughs," Vern Hatfield said, "and I might have made it safe. I might have gone on the rest of my life in another country and with another name. But I thought of you gloating here on how sly a deal you'd worked, and I'd rather be dead—I'd see Geneva dead—before I'd let you get away with it. That's why, damn you—"

Jim spun, but not soon enough. Hatfield's weapon was blasting as Jim moved, and it boomed a second shot as glass crashed and the toppling lamp was plunging the room into darkness.

Chapter VII

TERROR AT THE SHACK VILLAGE

THE sight Jim saw in that last wink of light was Pat Yeager, staggering. Pat Yeager with a pain-twisted mouth, with both hands grabbed to his chest, stumbling forward into the second explosion.

Then blackness. Blackness, with Jim Mellody springing for the center table and the Colts upon it. Blackness, and Vern Hatfield shooting a third time into it.

Jim pawed the gun, and he turned with it, and he knew his one salvation chance was to bring Vern Hatfield down. His own life—and maybe fifty others—depended upon a bullet that would hold a jail-crazy killer to answer for his crime.

But he had no chance to shoot.

Hatfield had fired his final shot as he jerked at the door, and now the outer shadows had him. He was running the gloom with twenty ways to turn, a hundred places to hide, and catching him was a needle-hunt in a haystack.

Sounds came from the inner rooms and Jim had no choice but to dash for it. Maybe Pat Yeager wasn't dead—maybe the Hangtown marshal had breath enough left to testify the truth—but that was a gamble that couldn't be chanced. In this uproar town who'd trust the Heelfly word?

Would even Geneva Logan believe that Jim hadn't turned from argument to murder?

He vaulted the side porch railing. He sprinted along the house, and as he turned the front corner a man on the steps began to shout. He was an elderly man, and he lifted an arm to shield his head at sight of Jim. Jim waved his pistol, jumped the pickets, darted for the saddle horse hitched to the rear of a buggy.

The startled animal reared and huffed, and for eternal seconds he could not loose the reins. He had snagged the pommel, was toeing for a swinging stirrup, when a shot whanged above his head. Then he was up, he was somehow clinging, and Pat Yeager's saddler was bouncing off like a runaway. From Major Ben-John Logan's porch somebody wasted four more cartridges after him.

But he had his start. He had a pistol for his hand, the marshal's carbine rubbed his leg, and there was strength and speed beneath him.

South by west. Ramrod Creek and Ramrod Butte and the old shack village. . . .

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THERE was a two-bit rumpus on the edge of town. A challenge was shouted from a brushy ridge, and rifle fire followed when Jim veered and speeded on. Either Yeager's patrols were poor marksman or J. Mellody's luck had changed, for the bullets sprayed wide. A yelling pursuit of horsemen started up, but the chase never reached within a quarter mile of him.

He soon could slow to a steadier traveling gait, steering across a sage-clumped prairie. Clouds still filmed the moon's thin crescent, but there was misty glow enough to silhouette the landmarks. The wind had freshened but Jim could smell no rain in it.

Maybe his luck *had* changed, at that. Maybe he would reach Mart's camp without losing his bearings or breaking a foreleg in a gopher's hole or running afoul of some Hangtown scouting party.

Past events screamed through his mind as he rode:

The right or wrong of Vern Hatfield's accusal was none of the Heelfly's concern. Jim still couldn't guess if that parlor rigamarole had been truth or moonshine, and perhaps he never would know. His instinct had liked and trusted Pat Yeager's solid ways. The same instinct had condemned Vern Hatfield on no more evidence than that he generally resembled Mart. What was it that stayed his hand, then, from knocking the lamp when the first chance was ripe?

He didn't know. All he knew was that his own thick-witted meddling had backfired. He had doused the powder barrel upon the fire of the Heelfly's danger, and now the sole resource was to run from it. Get out to the Ramrod camp and chase those men. Grab hold of Mart and the home-ranch bunch and lead them somewheres into a cyclone cellar. Maybe Red Lansing's influence could bring about a settlement when tempers had subsided and the kill-guns had cooled off.

He had failed Big Red—failed him bad. The best he could do from here on was to see that no further harm was done. . . .

A wooded bend marked a watercourse that he hoped was Ramrod Creek. He stopped for a cool-out and a drink for horse and man. He then rode on, grim-jawed, and another twenty minutes took him through rolling country. A pistol shot from ahead, a faint cowboy yip, announced the location of camp.

He smelled the smoke of fires, heard maudlin noises as he neared. A stumbly trail climbed the face of the butte, but his rattling approach aroused no sentinel until he reached the headland. A figure rose then from beside a rock and wavered forward.

"Hey—who're you, huh?"

Men were gathered by the fires in the open space beyond. Six or eight decrepit structures backed the fireglow. Somebody was singing—was that a woman's cackle? —and the mood of the camp was expressed, Jim thought, by this drunken horse-guard who wobbled up to challenge him with a bottle.

Jim chained half a dozen bitter words together, and the wrangler turned as if he had heard the countersign. A roped enclosure held a batch of horses, and beyond was a spring wagon to which Jim hitched his mount. He'd left his cartridge belt back in Hangtown, and as he strode towards the nearest light he tucked the

barrel of Pat Yeager's revolver inside his waistband.

He'd disarmed the marshal by a trick. He had started the chain of circumstances that had ended with Yeager defenseless against a killer's gun. And no man, guilty or innocent, deserves to be doomed without a fighting chance.

But no time now to worry the past. He would need all his wits to hold his temper in check and to steer the Heelfly wide of more mistakes. He would need every ounce of control he could muster to keep from climbing Mart Lansing on sight and breaking his tomfool neck.

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HUMPED figures rolled dice on a blanket. A guitar was strumming and sprawled sleepers snored lustily. A single man lifted up, yawning, as Jim came into the firelight.

"Where's Mart Lansing?"

"Mart? Why, I don't know if he's back. Them Flat Rock boys, when they pulled in, said he'd gone on to the Skillet Ranch. Where you from, brother? You fetch anythin' to drink?"

"Did Andy Weaver find this camp?"

"Who in hell is Andy Weaver? Who're you? You sound like somethin' went wrong."

The gamblers were looking up from their game. A man strolled across from the group at the second fire. The words for a powerful speech to these barroom loafers were a stinging in Jim's mouth that was hard to swallow. But he swallowed it. This wasn't quite the time nor place.

"Who's in charge here then?" he asked. "Who's runnin' this shootin'-match and where'll I find him?"

The newcomer answered. He was a tall man in puncher's garb, his left arm cradled in a sling, and he eyed Jim carefully before he spoke. "I reckon Pete Snell's the man you'd want. He's over at the main shack—c'mon, I'll show you."

Pete Snell—a stranger's name. A ragtag camp of strangers, of cheaply hired guns, of drunkenness and worse—

Jim clenched his fists. The Heelfly name mixed in such a mess! He walked beside the sling-armed man and his anger struck him dumb. He shook his head in reply to questions that made little sense to him.

Seven shacks in a slattern row, and the middle one larger than the rest. From the darkened smaller structures came the singing and laughing, the squeals and giggles and whoops of horseplay. Jim's companion gave a shrill whistle as he mounted to a sagging, roofless porch. He opened a squeaking door upon a lantern-lit interior.

"Man to see you, Pete," he called. "Go on in, mister."

Jim marched into a pigpen of disuse, a room of dust and spiderwebs with a gap-boarded floor below and storm-twisted beams above. Three men faced him in the feeble glow. The sling-armed man slammed the door shut, and some quality in the sound bit through the maze of his wrath. He glanced behind.

Sling-Arm had a pistol pointed.

"I don't know who or what this is, Pete," he said, "but I don't like the smell somehow. He come wanderin' in a minnit ago, askin' for Lansing, and he's kind of close-mouthed. Mebbe you'd better handle it."

Jim turned slowly frontwards. Suddenly, and for no clear reason, he was aware of serious danger. Not Hangtown coming in a rush, not the Heelfly's good repute at stake, but sharper, uglier danger that swirled for him within this room.

Chapter VIII

CONFAB WITH THE MURDER CREW

THAT odd impression faded with the next breath he drew, but the brief shock had sobered his emotions. He stood relaxed, arms dangling, and surveyed Mart Lansing's headquarters layout.

In the center of the room, beneath the beam-hung lanterns, was a rickety table. A jug and tincups on it, and a spread of solitaire. A fox-faced man with a little brown mustache rested his elbows over the cards. He had a pair of liquid eyes, dark and keen, and a clumsy bandage turbaned his head. This was Pete Snell, whoever he might be, and Jim instantly mistrusted the clever look of him.

Behind Snell was a fattish man who had grabbed up a carbine. To the left, inching forward from the dimness of the wall-bunks at the rear, was a spindly fellow with tousled hair. A shirt was his single garment,

and the blear of the whiskey he had downed could not conceal the fright that moved his features. Jim had know this man for ten years, and perhaps it was his queer reaction that stirred Jim's hunch of danger and deviltry. Why should Rafe Ludlum be goggling at him as if he spied a hobgoblin?

"All right, mister," said Pete Snell. "Who are you and what's your business?"

"You tell him, Rafe," said Jim.

But Ludlum was strangely fuddled. He pulled at his shirttail and finger-combed his scanty ginger hair. Rafe had worked for three or four of the Heelfly irons, an average sort of hand, and maybe his sheepishness was apology for the trouble he'd roused with his message to headquarters. Maybe he was drunker than he looked. Nevertheless, Jim didn't like it.

"Why, hidee, Jim!" he said at length, as if he'd just woke up. "This here's Jim Mellody, boys. He's the one—remember how I told you?"

Snell came to his feet. He was grinning, trying to explain, but Jim somehow had the feeling that his eyes were telling more important truths than his words. What instruction was he trying to flash to these others?

The headquarters hands were riding with Mart, he reported. They expected to collect thirty men or more from the foothills spreads between the Skillet and the river. They should be returning very shortly.

"You mean he still ain't sobered up?" Jim demanded. "He's goin' through with his craziness?"

"Well, I—"

"Who the hell are you anyhow, mister, to be put in charge? Who're these other two, and what kind of underhand fandango are you tryin' to pull off here?"

Snell touched his bandage. "We're what's left of Billy MacCumber's crew," he said quietly. "We're the ones that Hangtown didn't murder. All I know we're pullin' off is to square with the ambush sons who killed three good men. I'm in charge by Mr. Lansing's order."

The steady reply stopped Jim cold. With his nerves so skittery, with so many hasty things to be done, maybe he was seeing things. He'd better save his temper for Mart Lansing instead of lashing out at fence posts. If he'd been in these fellows' boots he'd probably be faunching to set the whole county afire.

"All right," he said gruffly, "but I'll give the orders from here. I figure we got an hour to get this camp cleared out. Round the women up and cart 'em into Windigo. Pick four or five of your sober men, Snell, and fan 'em out towards Hangtown. They can shoot warnin' if trouble arrives sooner than I expect. Roust the rest and scatter 'em quick. The sooner and faster they ride for home the more will wake up in the mornin'."

Sling-Arm gave an exclamation. Fatty lowered his carbine and peered at Jim with small, round, china-blue eyes. Pete Snell's arm swept the solitaire cards from the table.

"Hold on!" he said. "What the devil you up to? Hangtown won't fight. If they'd wanted war they'd started it when we had that shootin' skirmish this noontime. Mart knew they'd back down. If he can get the extra men—if sixty guns go ridin' in—he swears there won't a single shot be fired."

"You listen to me," Jim said grimly. "Hangtown's had a hundred men saddled and armed since afternoon. They'd been busted out here long ago if one man hadn't held 'em back. That one man was Pat Yeager, and now he's out of the picture. The town will have reason to believe that the Heelfly shot him. You savvy that, Snell?"

"I don't like this, Pete," Sling-Arm said abruptly. "I don't like his look nor the way he talks. How do we know who he is—get the notion? It was goin' smooth until he butted in here."

Jim frowned. Here again was that weasling undercurrent. "This butte has been scouted all evenin'," he said. "When the next lookout reports to town—which might be already—there's a big gent named Blackie who'll lead a tear here. Unless you want drunk fools slaughtered you'll start this camp on the hightail."

Snell opened his mouth but did not speak. Fatty shifted his grip on the carbine, and Sling-Arm grunted an expletive. Jim glanced at Rafe Ludlum, and there was something in the twist of Rafe's features, some weakly fearful message, that betrayed them all.

A flutter of his heart told Jim their treachery. With a choke of breath, he knew the shocking truth. He knew that these men had murdered Billy MacCumber, and that in a matter of seconds their guns would be ganging another victim who couldn't do a damn' thing about it.

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THROUGH the web of their lies Jim could see the hazy skeleton of fact. These tough extra hands had trailed from the Junction to rob old Billy of his twelve thousand dollars. Rafe Ludlum was working in cahoots with them, and the climax of their devil's deal was the holdup attack four nights ago upon Billy's camp north of Hangtown.

They were the unknowns who had pounced from the dark. Their bandaged wounds were proof of Billy's resistance. They had killed Billy and his two faithful hands just as ruthlessly as they now would kill Jim Mellody unless he could somehow stall them. . . .

"Get your clothes, Rafe," Jim said harshly. His life depended upon hiding his suspicions, upon his ability to flimflam. "You, Snell—you doin' what I say or have I got to make you do it? I want sentries posted up ahead, you hear?"

"I dunno, Pete," Fatty muttered. "Mebbe Link is right. Who'd even know that he come here?"

What had gone wrong with their robbery plans Jim couldn't begin to guess. Perhaps they'd underestimated old Billy's toughness. They may have thought they could pull the steal without violence, but with three dead men tallied against them they were suddenly riding the owlhoot horns. Pete Snell must have been the clever fellow who figured the easier out for them.

Escape by running would have been the risky way. They'd have had to leave Rafe Ludlum behind—either that or kill him—and then depend upon scary Rafe to hide their trail with some cock-and-bull story. They'd had to skulk and dodge through unfamiliar country, with their wounds breeding questions wherever they rode, and trust to doubtful luck to evade the pursuit of Hangtown's law and the vengeance of the Heelfly.

And so they had chosen the safer method. Sit tight, that was the stunt, and play 'em close to the vest. Hangtown's tough reputation was one factor in their favor. Those gunfire brushes as the herd drove through the cutoff supplied a false basis for saddling the crime upon local unknowns. The dead could not deny any lies they chose to tell, and Rafe Ludlum's trusted word would be strong support for them. Three of them could muddle the murder tracks at Billy's camp while Rafe rode to Heelfly headquarters with a nightmare message. . . .

Rafe had sidled back to collect his pants and boots. Snell's face showed furtive indecision, and he moved his hand in delaying signal.

"Easy, boys," he said. "No need to fly off the handle." He looked at Jim with a mildness that should have been disarming. "The thing is, Mr. Mellody, that we've had out strict orders from Mart. We're naturally mixed up, you see, when you hop in and turn 'em inside-out on us."

"I'll tend to Mart," Jim promised. "We'll fan as we go and we're bound to collect him somewheres. Now get that wagon ready for the women. Tell the men outside that the Heelfly Ranch will pay double any money they've been promised. Ride 'em south and ride 'em wide—anyhow to get rid of 'em."

But sly Pete Snell still hesitated. He had unexpected odds to weigh and scant time to weigh them. The next minute must decide his gamble—whether to trust his bamboozle wits or to solve his problem with a bullet.

Jim could guess what the decision would be, and forewarning prickled his scalp and tightened his muscles. So far all the twists of luck had played into Snell's hands. Mart Lansing had been on the headquarters bossdeck to swallow the hook, line and sinker of Rafe's tattle. Mart had come helling at the head of a blood-eyed war party, and Pete Snell must have thanked the Lord for Mart's highhanded temper and his whiskey-fed bravado.

A shoot-down fight between Hangtown and the Heelfly would be an earthquake upheaval in which Billy MacCumber's trouble would be lost forever. Snell and his sidekicks had doubtlessly used their every wile to arouse a cover-up fury, and most likely they had fired the shots that

downed those catcalling boys on Market Street. Their crooked cards had raked in all the tricks until up popped the joker in the person of Jim Mellody.

Pete Snell pushed back his chair. His hand rested on the table's edge, his shoulders hunched, and abruptly his verdict had been reached. A quirk of lip, a squinted eye, told Jim his fate. For another moment, however, gathering himself for the payoff pounce, the foxy man continued to dissemble.

"Go on, Link," he ordered. "What else can we do but like Mr. Mellody says? Throw some outposts up the creek and over towards the ridges. Rafe, fetch my saddle from the upper bunk. Don't stand there like a dummy."

His right hand dropped from sight. His words were a windy blind for the killer's intent that would strike at the first quick opportunity. "Leave him to me, boys," said his unspoken command, and Link and Fatty caught the drift of it. Their weapons were lowering when shaky Rafe Ludlum gave the game away.

"No—!" Rafe wailed. "He's wise, Pete. Lookit 'im—lookit his face! I warned you he wouldn't swallow it."

"Take him!" Pete Snell shouted.

He shoved the table as he came erect. His snub-nosed revolver was whipping up, and the room shuddered with the crash of four guns blasting.

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FOUR guns shooting, three against one, and the first shots were so closely timed that they seemed to merge in a single stunning explosion. Jim Mellody was bracketed—Link behind him, Snell straight ahead, the fat carbine at a right-hand angle—and that first short-range volley should have killed him.

As he lurched and drew, jumped and fired, he counted himself a dead man.

His prime advantage was readiness. He was moving sidewise, crouching, with Rafe's betrayal shout. His pistol was swinging free, jutting to point-blank aim, as Pete Snell shoved the table. That Link and the carbine had relaxed, waiting their leader's command, was Jim's chance; he was a traveling target and had a half-step start in his despairing counter-attack.

He shot at Snell—point it and pull—as the fox-face cut loose on him, and in the same movement he was launching a headlong plunge for the carbine. There was a spout past his face amid the thunder-boom.

He had aimed his opening bullet for Snell because that ink-eyed buzzard was the handiest target. He was shifting fast, for jump-jack speed was his sole defense against Link. He sprang for the carbine for he was doomed if Fatty found an open stand-still shot.

All this in the tick-tock interval that rumbled with the start-off volley. He triggered once more as he sprang at Fatty, aiming at emptiness, and once again his senses were drowned in cartridge-roar and powder-fume.

He thought that his sweeping left hand struck the carbine barrel in the instant of its second explosion. His shoulder rammed a human bulk, and a muzzle blasting overhead was a force that tumbled him in mauling wrestle. With no twinge of pain whatsoever his left arm was suddenly paralyzed—it was gone, it wasn't there. He jammed his pistol into flesh, and the recoil seemed to fling him bodily.

He was jolted aside—his face was wet—the room was wavering, bucking, blinking. . . .

But it was the fat man's dying heave that had kicked him wide. It was the fat man's blood that drenched him. He sprawled on his back like an overflopped beetle, threshing for balance, and his frantic impression was that the roof was caving. The lights were swinging, guttering, and he wallowed in a mist. Then the mist billowed and sling-armed Link swam through it with his gun afire.

Jim cocked his wrist, or tried to. A sledge-hammer thump whacked the plank beside his head as he squeezed the trigger. He fired up at Link's looming ghost—but Link came on relentlessly. He charged ahead with lengthening strides, and Jim could not see that now his pistol sagged and his eyes were blanked of humanity.

Jim triggered again. The hammer fell on an empty cylinder, and it was queer that a noiseless phantom bullet should bring Link down. He toppled almost at Jim's feet, and his fall was the signal for an earthquake upheaval.

Timbers crackled and groaned and a crash jounced the floor. Jim was scrambling up, swabbing his eyes, all his senses reeling, and a scuttling figure darted for the doorway where new voices were shouting, where added guns were abruptly shooting wildly.

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PETE SNELL was sprawled back with his chair, and a pool of flame was licking his crimsoned turban. The blood-rimmed hole in the center of his forehead was tribute to the accuracy of Jim's first bullet. Fatty huddled in a ball, dead arms still clasping a powder-scorched chest, and Link stretched prone near the wreck of the table. The random upward blast of the fat man's carbine must have shivered the rotting beam from which the lanterns dangled. The collapse had crushed the table in its fall, spilled oil and fire upon the tinder-dry floor boards. That was the cue.

Red and yellow tongues of flame scorched the air.

Jim Mellody had the fat man's carbine. He had dropped Pat Yeager's empty Colt and grabbed the first substitute. He was backed into the wall shadow, away from the expanding rivulets of flame. He knew where he was, and what he was up against. That he lived—that his luck had escaped the jaws of that three-way death trap—was a miracle for later pondering. It was a godsend that still left him with more impossible tasks to do.

He did not want to kill a batch of those whiskey-woozed fools outside. He wanted to clear them out of here, to save their hides from Hangtown's wrath, but the whole thing had passed beyond reason. They didn't know him from Adam's ox, and a thunder voice couldn't shout the truth above the pandemonium they were raising. At the same time J. Mellody didn't hanker much to be shot by mistake or crisped to a cinder.

Mart Lansing's bunch had to be halted—that was one thing. Another was that the flames were spreading, and the smoke was fogging ever thicker. . . .

There was a momentary lull. The outer noise subsided to a rumble, and then the women began to shrill:

"Hangtown comin'—"

"Stranger done it—killed Pete Snell!"

"Myrt heard 'em—Hangtown's on the march a hunnerd strong!"

Then men joined in, questions and curses, and the voices fanned apart:

"Where's Mart Lansing?"

"Horses, boys! Scatter an' hide!"

"The Heelfly's done run out on us. We're trapped unless we ramble now!"

Somebody emptied a pistol through the doorway of the burning shack, and Jim discovered what a useless weapon a carbine was to a one-armed man. He had taken a bullet—Link's second shot, most likely—somewhere in the shoulder. Blood soaked his sleeve and crawled his back, but curiously there was still no special pain. It was mostly a numbness, and the smoke that choked his throat and streamed his eyes was a greater discomfort.

The voices wavered, spread apart, and now the opposite wall of the shack was aflame. Jim retreated to a side window and rammed the carbine butt at dusty boards. Three splintering strokes opened

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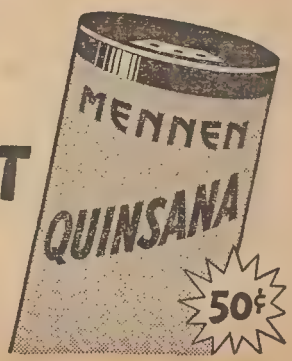

a getaway space, but he waited momentarily with the gun barrel propped on the window ledge and his finger snugging the trigger.

The voices were running, fading.

Apparently Mart's hired guns had abandoned him to the smoke and flame and to their dead companions. The noise was flowing towards the headland, and Jim dropped the carbine and trotted into the night on legs that were none too steady.

In the moil of confusion he should be safe enough. Mart's barrel-house army was in full retreat, and that much of his chore had been accomplished. If he wasn't too late to rustle a horse—

A void of fatigue surrounded him, and he wanted to fall into its softness, to blank his mind and ease his flesh with the sleep of forgetfulness.

But he couldn't. His body wouldn't fall The pound of his heart and the pant of breath and the plod of his boots were lifting forces that swept him onward.

Chapter IX

HELL'S HIDEOUT

HE HAD no speed. He lumbered towards the eddy of shapes at the head of the bluff, and the nightmare wasn't finished yet. The moon peeked from a slitted eye, and it was a sorry sight the moonglow uncovered on Ramrod Butte that early morning.

The campfires had dwindled, but already the headquarters shack was a roaring conflagration. Flame spouted from roof and windows, sparks soared the windborne smoke, and soon all seven shacks would be blazing.

The camp was chaos. Sodden men lay in their blankets, snoring through the din; stragglers, reeling and tumbling, were gape-faced moths drawn to the firespume. Jim tried to turn them, tried to shout fear, but they were beyond any common understanding.

At the roped pens where the horses were held confusion had boiled over. Six or eight of the soberest men had hurried to saddle before the rush began. A few were already riding off, but the laggards found themselves hemmed in by squalling groups who strove to unsaddle them.

Fists flew, figures tangled, struggling rivals squirmed and rolled among kicking boots and thrashing hoofs. Flustered ponies surged and trumpeted and reared, and gunblasts stirred the tumult into a howling furor.

A dozen cayuses bolted the ropes, pelting through a yelling, arm-waving cordon that tried to turn them. More were lost in a flurry that stampeded the edge of the embankment. Piles of gear were scattered, unsteady riders tried to mount bareback, and presently fifty men and horses were chasing the butte like chickens with their heads off.

The women clustered near the bedwagon, raising more clamor than the rest combined. They were holding one horse of the harness pair, but the mate was not to be captured. They were pleading, begging aid, and one tall amazon had a revolver with which she was threatening all creation.

"Hangtown—!" a woman squealed. "They'll murder us!"

"Guns, boys!" somebody boomed. "Block the up-trail—empty every damn' saddle!"

But Jim had heard those fighting yips too many times before. He cupped his hands to lips and expelled his voice in a roar. "Hold it!" he shouted. "It's the Heelfly—Mart Lansing—hold your fire!"

The yipping riders came clattering up the slant of the bluff, and Mart Lansing on his picture horse—a blaze-face black with four matched stockings—was in the van of twenty warriors. Jim spotted him as he came into the first fringe of light. He pulled up in a rearing pivot, his show-off stunt, and began to cuss.

Men pushed up to him, shouting and gesturing, but Jim waited until the faces of the other riders could be distinguished in the fire-glare. He tried to steady his voice, but his first effort was a throaty croak. He tried again.

"Mart—Mart Lansing!" he called, and faces were quickly turned to him. They didn't know what to expect next.

"Frosty—Ike—P r e a c h e r!" he cried. "You there, Vic Garrison!"

There was a stir, horses shifting. He heard their mutters, heard his name pronounced: "It's Jim . . . Hell, boys, it's Jim Mellody!"

MART kneed towards him. Mart didn't look drunk, but the sound of his cussing voice had been the tipoff. Jim had slept in the same young bed with Mart, back in the days when Big Red Lansing was happy to count his cattle by the hundreds, and when two kids have been raised together, they learn each other's moods and ways. Jim needed no longer to sense Mart's lock-jawed determination than Mart did to read the signs of Jim's anger and desperation.

The sight of Jim's face, his slaughter-house garb, brought a grunted exclamation. "What the devil! How did you get here? What in hell's been going on?"

"Plenty," said Jim. "The big thing though, is to gather the horses and get these crazy drunks long gone. We got no time to lose. I want ever'body started south within a fast ten minutes."

"South! Damn you, what you up to? Where's Pete—Pete Snell? Who set that fire? What fool by the creek took a shot at us? What's all this jabber that Hangtown's on the hump?"

"Listen to me and listen quick," Jim growled. "Pat Yeager's been shot. Hangtown knows the lay of this camp, and a hundred men may be hellin' here this minute. You want a slaughter?"

"Slaughter!" Mart cried. "By God, we'll give 'em slaughter. We'll treat 'em to a taste of the same they handed to Billy MacCumber. You hear that, boys? Hangtown's—"

Jim jumped and grabbed. Mart flailed a downward punch at his face, tried to spur aside, but nothing could evade Jim's savagery. His frustrations, his fears, all the torments that had scourged him, fused into a giant's strength of rage that hauled Mart to earth, that hurled him in a staggering tumble.

"Damn you, Mart—"

Mart was bouncing up. He was big and strong and his fibre was tough. He could hold his own with fist or gun in any average company, and in their boyhood scraps his extra weight and reach had given him a slight advantage. Mart had Big Red's bullheaded temper and his own twisted brand of pride, and he came erect with a wordless snarl of damnation.

Jim surged a forward step. His hand was clawed, cords ridged his neck, cold trembles shivered through him, but some control beyond himself toned his words to harsh monotony.

"Go on," said his raspy stranger's voice. "Go on and draw your cutter. Make yourself a bigger fool. Hangtown never killed Billy MacCumber, but don't let that stop you from fixin' it for more men to be killed."

"Stay back—" Mart panted. "No man alive can crowd me!"

Jim shook his head, striding on. "I'm comin', Mart, alive or dead. I'm unarmed —I got just one hand—but I'm climbin' you. You got your choice to eat crow or to gun me."

He moved another step, and it wasn't cowardice that stiffened Mart's tall frame. In Jim's flat challenge, in his mechanical pace, was a grim fatality that even the fright and stupor of Ramrod Butte could recognize. He was taller than life, he was destiny incarnate—and a stronger man than Mart Lansing might have bowed before him.

Mart stepped back. His hand lifted from holster, fingers spread, and he muttered incoherently.

For a heartbeat instant the tense pose held. They were small black puppets on a great firelit stage. It was the clash that the years had foretold—Jim's will against Mart's arrogance—and in that silent duel, while strangers watched, they sealed their pact of enmity.

Jim drew a deep breath, clawed fingers relaxing. "Vic—Preacher!" he called sharply. "Herd this bunch together. The rest of you Heelfly men round the horses in and get that wagon started. Shoo 'em south—"

Gunfire came from the rim of the butte. Three shots from a frantic pistol, signaling alarm. . . . A horseman charged the headland path, shouting as he came.

He was one of the bar-room hirelings who had saddled and fled before the picket-line stampede began. He was the rider who had fired upon Mart's reinforcements, thinking them foes, and then had galloped blind in the opposite direction. Thirty guns covered him as he pulled in his lathered mount.

He was pointing behind. His mouth was stretched for a full voiced shout that excitement throttled to a wheeze.

"Cut off—" he gasped. "We're circled in!

Hangtown comin'—up the creek—couldn't tell how many!"

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"HOLD it!" cried Jim Mellody, cutting through the garbled voices.

He needed a platform to preach from if he was going to be heard. He grasped for Mart's pommel, awkwardly hoisted himself aboard the fidgeting blaze-face. "Stand fast!" he ordered. "You Heelfly men—ever'body—listen here to me! Put down your guns, I tell you. There'll be no shootin'—no war tonight!"

Flame-flushed faces stared.

"We got no fight with Hangtown and never had," he shouted. "The men who murdered Billy MacCumber have paid for it in full. Do as you're told and there'll be no trouble. I'll skin the first fool who cracks a shell loose."

Mart Lansing gripped his boot. Mart's handsome features were strained between fury and uncertainty. "Get down from my horse," he demanded. "You crazy, Jim, or what? If it's fight they're after we'll give 'em fight. What else but bullets can hold 'em off?"

"We'll find a way, Mart," Jim said huskily. "It's our deal—yours and mine. . . . Frosty—Ike—get a couple torches. Put somethin' white on a pole. One o' you others lend Mart a horse—"

If a flag of truce would spike the guns he didn't know. If white surrender would stay the Hangtown riders—no, it was a doubtful gamble. And still they had to risk it.

Would Blackie be leading them? Would revenge for Pat Yeager be wild enough goad to launch an attack upon resistless men? Would they shoot first and leave the questions to be settled when the smoke had blown away?

Yes, that might be the way of it. The avarice of a quartet of thieves—Pete Snell's trail crew traitors—had already murdered innocent men. They had started a chain of circumstance that now might multiply those deaths by the score. But if that's the way it had to be—if the Heelfly was doomed to greater woes—then Jim Mellody's best was to face the worst in the front line of catastrophe. . . .

Mart Lansing had mounted an LIG horse. The swirl of events, his brush with Jim, had jolted his whiskey-sodden spite out of him. His face was bleakly set, and he reined apart from the mutters and glances of his newest gunhand recruits. He was Big Red's son, the Heelfly heir, and his loss of command was bitter medicine. Still his narrowed eyes paid grudging tribute to the quality of Jim's leadership.

"All right, Mart," Jim said. "You sidin' me?"

"You're crazy," Mart told him. "You'll get us all wiped out. An army couldn't storm this place—"

"The Heelfly caused this deviltry," Jim said dully. "If you hadn't wanted to make such a big loud noise—if I hadn't let Pat Yeager be shot—the blame rests square on us, Mart! If it's got to be a bullet finish then we're the first who should face it. Ain't that what Red would say?"

"You think I'm scared?" Mart demanded. "You trying to show me up, or what? Come on, damn you, and we'll see who's afraid!"

Ike and Frosty were cussing skittish mounts. They held tall torches that flickered and fumed, and Vic Garrison bore a petticoat on a pole. At the rim of the headland they spread in array—Jim and Mart flanking the truce flag, the flaring signals close behind.

"Hear 'em?" said squint-eyed Vic Garrison presently. "Lissen there along the crick."

Sounds magnified in the night's stillness. They were coming fast and openly, no more than six or eight by estimate. But how many others were following behind? You couldn't tell.

Jim cupped his hands. "Hangtown—hold your fire, Hangtown!"

The cavalcade slowed, came on again. They were well within shooting range, and soon thin answer echoed:

"Heelfly—don't fire!"

"Jim—Mart—Jim Mellody. . . ."

Two voices. Jim glanced at Mart in bewilderment. Maybe he was hearing things, for one of them sounded like Andy Weaver. And the other—

No, it *couldn't* be a woman!

Hope was like a blow that hammered weakness into him. The smoke or the torch flame or something must have got

into his eyes for not until the six hurrying riders were mounting the trail below would his sight admit the truth. Andy Weaver was first of them, waving a tatter of cloth and shouting his identity, and close behind Andy rode Geneva Logan.

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PAT YEAGER had sent her to keep the peace. Pat Yeager had two bullets in him, but the doctor said that the Hangtown marshal was too tough a man to die. He'd sent Geneva to Ramrod Butte because he couldn't tell what crazy stories might sweep the town or what crazy men might be tempted to do on account of them.

Vern Hatfield was known to be the marshal's assailant, but some broken-jawed lawman from the edge of the county had come riding with the news that a pair of Heelfly men had busted Vern from jail. All kinds of half-baked notions were flowing the streets, and Yeager was afraid that Blackie and the rest of his hotheads might take a notion to jump the reservation. The location of the Heelfly camp had somehow leaked around, and Geneva and these trusty men had come to act as buffers against any foolish outbreak.

"I got lost, Jim," Andy Weaver cried. "I got directions all mixed up, and pure luck steered me out here. I was up the crick a ways—"

"You think Blackie will be comin'?" Jim asked.

"I don't know," said the girl. "If he does I'll find some way to stop him. Pat put his trust in me. He promised you that nothing would happen, and he wouldn't let the doctor touch him until I agreed to ride here with Dave Robbins. They might not heed to sensible talk in town, he said, but even Blackie wouldn't attack if a woman he respected stood in the path of his gunfire."

"Is Yeager hurt bad? Are you sure he'll—"

"He'll pull through," she said thinly. "Pat's too good—too brave to die. The pain was so sharp that he could scarcely talk, yet it wasn't himself he worried about. Watching him there, listening to his shaky voice—something made me start to cry and I thought I'd never stop. He's *got* to live—"

"I heard the shots and saw the fire," said Andy Weaver, "and I happened to stumble onto 'im as I poked along this way. I was tryin' to do what little I could when these folks come past. Lucky thing I hollered to 'em, wasn't it?"

"It'll all straighten out in a while," Jim said to the girl. "I got a hunch we'll learn some surprises when all the facts come out. Has Vern Hatfield been found?"

"Vern—" she whispered. "I hope they never find him—that I never see him again. Poor Pat tried to protect him. He claimed at first that a stranger shot him, and then he said it was all an accident. It was for my sake he lied. He thought that I—"

"I know," said Jim.

She shook her head. Perhaps she was drunk with the same repressed excitement that held Jim Mellody in a sort of daze, for she smiled at the stranger faces that surrounded her. Sitting in her parlor, dark and neat and demure, she had been a sadly pretty girl, but now Jim thought he could see new qualities of beauty.

There was something in her look—some depth of spirit or strength of emotion. In the ruddy torchlight, with trail dust smeared upon her cheek and her hair awry, she was the image of a tenderness unknown to Jim, of an exaltation beyond his present understanding. Was there somewhere a girl—one right and certain girl—who would some day smile that same inward smile when she thought of Jim Mellody?

"I loved the dolls I played with," she

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said, "and maybe that's how I loved Vern. I never thought of anyone else in just that special way. But there tonight, when I knelt beside Pat, I remembered something daddy told me. When I grew up, he used to say, I'd know the difference between a boy and a man."

"His leg's broke," said Andy Weaver. "Horse fell down a bank on him. I heard him moan and groan in a thicket, plumb out of his head. I'll need another man to go back with me—"

"Go back where?" Jim said. "Whose leg is broke?"

"That's what I been tryin' to tell you," said Andy. "We got to rush some help—it's poor Rafe Ludlum."

Jim swung about quickly to face him, and with the turn of his shoulder a knife of pain stabbed his back. A simple movement—that was the queer part of it—transformed the numbness of Link's bullet into fiery torture. He slapped at the bite of it, stumbled a forward pace, and then came a brief gap of nothingness. . . .

He was out for just an instant. A shake of his head revived him, and he would have been all right if they'd let him alone. No need for Frosty to be clearing a path through the crowd. No sense in Vic Garrison hauling him along like a tiptoe bale of fodder. He growled at them, muttered orders for Andy Weaver to hurry.

"It's all right," said Geneva Logan. "We can take care of the rest of it."

She was there beside him. She had a softly comforting voice, and somehow he believed her.

Chapter X

LAST STOP

THE shacks were reduced to black bones and fuming embers, and new fires had been lighted on Ramrod Butte. The aftermath of panic was a brooding quiet in which actions were slowed, voices subdued. It was like the waning hours of a death watch, Jim thought, with all the tears run dry.

He sat on a blanket, head bowed toward his knees, and the warmth of flames had dozed him off for a while. It wasn't sleep exactly, for the throb of his wound had been with him all the time. The bullet had lodged in the thick of muscles near the shoulder blade, and as soon as a little more strength came back he'd have Vic Garrison gouge it out of there.

Everything would be all right. The part of him that was still awake knew that the horses had mostly been rounded in, and that heaps of gear were being sorted. Outpost riders were scouting the darkness for Hangtown danger that would never come, and any minute should see the return of Ike and Frosty and Andy Weaver.

He knew these realities even in his dreams. Pete Snell and Link and Fatty came storming at him from the fire, but Geneva Logan and lantern-jawed Dave Robbins were always close across the way to rescue him. Vic Garrison spilled the water he was boiling, and from the sizzling steam a twelve foot tall Mart Lansing spouted. This Mart had twenty pairs of hands to fasten at Jim's throat, but a stir and murmur from the other fires made them powerless.

"Sit still," Geneva Logan said. She knelt beside him, and the strips of cloth she held had recently been her underskirt.

"But that's Andy comin'," said Jim. "I got to—"

"We got to get that bullet out," Vic Garrison said firmly. "It's apt to poison up unless we do. I swear it's no job at all, Jim. Once I get myself fixed around it won't take but a minnit or two."

Andy and Ike came into the firelight. They hunkered down and spread their hands to warm, and as they spoke they watched the fire.

"He was still there," said Andy. "He's passed out now, but he talked a plenty along the way. Hollerin', screamin', prayin'—he was halfway crazy, Jim."

"Rafe Ludlum," gray haired Ike said solemnly. "Him and me shared blankets many's the time."

"It started up at the Junction," said Andy. "Rafe got drunk with the extra hands on payoff night, and he let the news leak that the buyer had handed Billy MacCumber twelve thousand cash instead of bank draft. He swears he made no deal with 'em then—that they trailed along on their own hook and forced him into it later—but I reckon that don't make no diff'rence."

Silent figures were gathering around. Jim

caught a hazy glimpse of Mart Lansing's stiff features among the background faces. Vic Garrison's voice was gruff with authority, ordering men to stand out of his light.

"Lean forward, Jim," he ordered. "I got to strip that shirt away from there. Will you kindly steady this pan of water, ma'am?"

"The reason that Billy came through by Hangtown," said Ike, "was to straighten out what happened on that up-trip. Seems he'd made some deal with a man in town—friend of his named Logan—to drive the Longhorn Cut off. Logan was to fix it with the local men, settle all damages, and Billy would repay him afterwards."

"That's right," said Geneva quickly. "Dad did arrange it. There were a few little skirmishes, since some of the outlying farmers hadn't been warned, but they didn't amount to anything."

"I got to see where I'm workin'," Vic Garrison said, and Jim winced to the sting of hell-hot water. He clamped his teeth, held his chest with folded arms. Vic had a good hand for doctoring spavins and yanking Heelfly teeth, but his method was based more on strength than science.

"Well, anyhow," said Andy Weaver, "old Billy camped his boys at the willows north of town. He rode on in to see his friend, and Snell's three jumped the layout as soon as he came back. They wore bandana masks, Rafe said, but Billy somehow seemed to know 'em. He cussed 'em by name and grabbed his gun, even under the drop. His other two hands joined into it, and that's where Snell and Link got their wounds. Billy was still alive when the smoke blew off, and he spit in Snell's face as they searched 'im. They found no money in his belt, and Link shot 'im three times in the head just out of pure mean temper."

"Now we're ready," Vic Garrison said. "I think I know right where she sets, Jim—there along that flattish bone—but I'll feel around a little first. Let's see—it pain you here?"

"Uunnnh," Jim grunted.

"It's easy enough to figure out," said Mart Lansing's voice, speaking for the benefit of the crowd. "As soon as Frosty told me what Rafe said I could work out the rest of it."

LAST OF THE WAGON ROD!

Old Man Si Bacon was too busy raising longhorns and fighting Indians to file legal claim to his big spread. . . . He remembered that fact too late, for a quick-trigger land-shark's army was already on the march, and the only friends Si could count on were hitting the brush, with dead-or-alive blood-bounty on their heads!

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10¢ DIME ALL STORIES COMPLETE WESTERN MAGAZINE

Mart would be stepping forward into the light. Jim's eyes were tightly winked with pain, but the wavering vision of his mind could see how Mart would look—like a grave, wise judge without the beard and glasses.

"Old Billy must have suspected that he was being followed," Mart said, "and he played it safe by leaving his cash with Major Logan. They found the receipt when they searched him. They'd already risked too much to be stopped short then, so they rode fast for Hangtown. Rafe was merely the lookout—he couldn't say what went on inside—but I gather they found Logan alone and put a pistol to his head. Maybe he tried to break away as they ransacked the place—"

"You're spillin' it, ma'am," Vic Garrison said.

"Sorry," Geneva Logan breathed. "I—I couldn't help it."

"This is the delicate part," said Vic. "Steady, Jim—I won't hurt you." He swabbed more hot water on tortured tenderness, then made some other devilish thrusting move. "It pain you there?"

"Unh-uh," Jim sighed, and the earth tilted and the fire heaved and the spinning night fell down on him.

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BUT he could rouse with the rest when dawn chased the soot from the sky. Coffee was a little help, and a dram of barleycorn was a bigger one. His arm was slung, his shoulder bandaged, but every new move stirred a fresh ache in him. Vic Garrison swore his worries were over, though, and proudly displayed the chunk of lead he'd removed while Jim was woolgathering.

In the fresh daylight two parties set forth along Ramrod Creek. The larger one straggled south toward Flat Rock and Windigo, toward the Skillet and the LIG. Four men had been hurt in the riot at the horsepens, a few were unaccounted for, but except for three charred remnants in the ashes of the main shack they had no dead to leave behind.

The smaller bunch rode slowly for Hangtown, and if it was a sad parade for some there were others who journeyed rejoicing. The most dejected man plodded in the drag-tail—Mart Lansing. His jaws were clamped, his sleepless eyes were puffed, and now and then an urge would spur him to the side of one of the headquarters hands.

"Look, Preacher! You know as well as I do that nobody's at fault. What else could we do but believe Rafe's story?

"They sure did slicker us."

"And what if we did take a drink now and then? Big Red takes his whiskey when whiskey's his mood."

"Sure, Mart. I guess so."

"Well, don't forget it, that's all, when the old man puts you on the carpet. Talk up to him."

But as Preacher said to Frosty and Ike, ruffing your feathers against Red Lansing was no job for the average hand. The safest thing was to tell the truth.

Jim Mellody kept feeling more cheerful as they went along. Dave Robbins had gone on ahead into town, and he came back to meet them at the halfway mark. Everything was calm, he said. Pat Yeager had surprised the doctors, the way he was rallying, and young Dan Whitlow and that other boy—the two who'd been shot in the street—were well out of danger. Judge Fallon had opened Major John-Ben's hallway safe and found the Heelfly currency wrapped in a memorandum of ownership. Blackie had simmered down completely.

"Any news of Vern?" Geneva asked.

"Not yet. Looks like he's cleared out for good, I reckon."

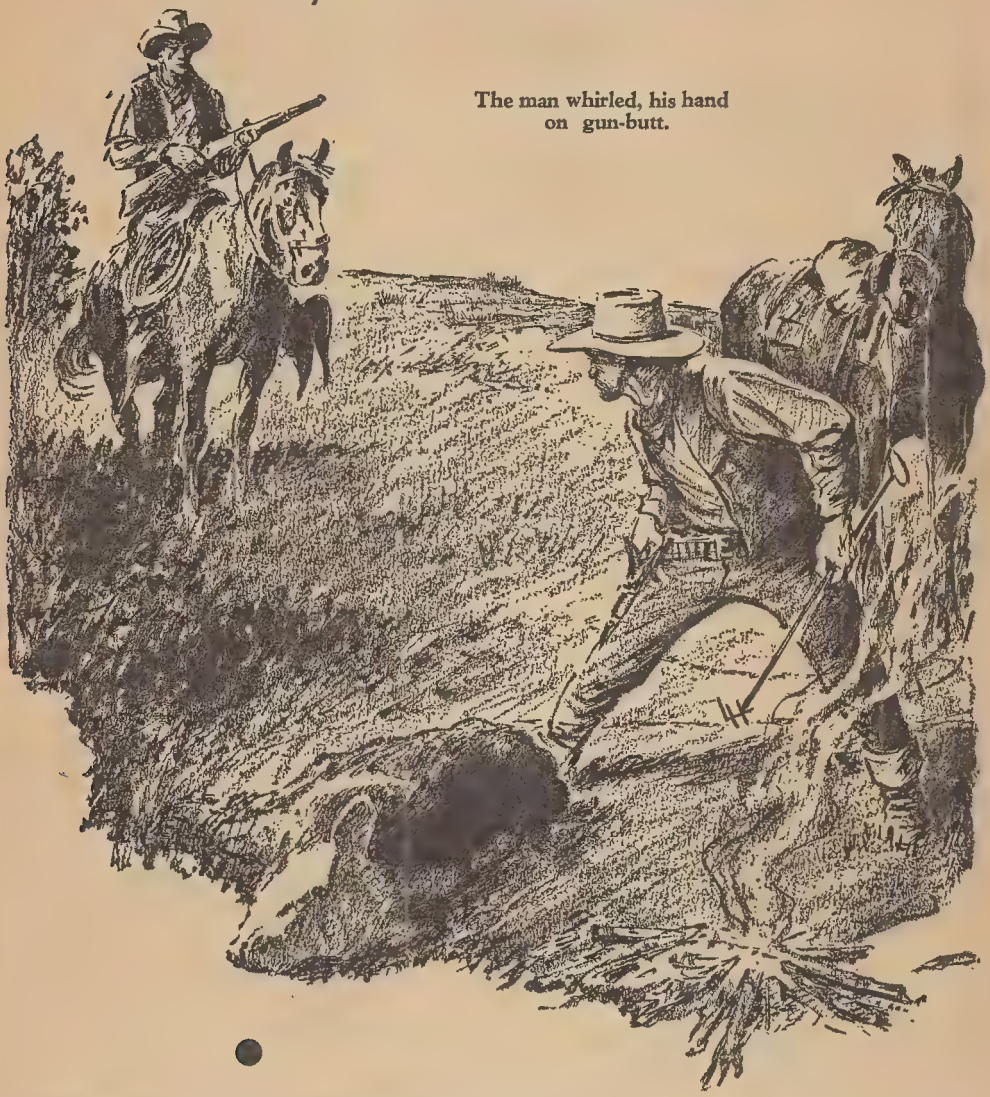
Jim glanced at her. She was staring ahead across the prairie, and Hangtown held both her sorrow and her happiness. Jim wished that his clumsy tongue could find some proper word to say, but maybe silence was better. Maybe she already knew that her father's death, her days of grieving, would be repaid in her happy years with Pat Yeager. . . .

Vic Garrison felt well pleased as he rode along, and so did Andy Weaver. The merriest man in all the procession, though, was scraggle-haired Rafe Ludlum. They'd primed Rafe plentifully from the jug against the torture of his broken leg, and now his chattering fears and moans, his wild denials of the dawn had abated. He sang and chuckled and whooped through the final miles that delivered his neck to the hangman.

THE END

POP'S GUNSMOKE EPITAPH

By C. M. MILLER



The man whirled, his hand on gun-butt.

Long Tom Gearhart promised to pay a thousand dollars in cash to the man who would point out Pop Warren's killer—but that blood-money informer turned out ten times more deadly than the bush-whack murderer himself!

TODAY in the Big Bend country of Wyoming, men often stop and marvel at the big white tombstone with an angel on top, that proudly stands under the towering, rustling-leaved cottonwoods.

It is the biggest, finest, whitest tombstone west of the Mississippi River. A strong fence keeps the grazing cattle back, and the grass is always green and freshly tended.

On the tombstone is inscribed this epitaph:

POP WARREN
He Died For The Boxed G
Greater Love Hath No Man

Long Tom Gearhart was in Cassidy's Saloon having his after-dinner drink when Jim Halliday stalked in and knocked the glass out of Tom's hand.

"I'd like to know who the hell gave you permission to run a roundup crew on Lazy H range," Jim snapped. "Next time I see a Boxed G man on my land I'll shoot first and talk later. And that goes for you, too, Gearhart!"

Long Tom stood there, a tall, lanky, shaggy-browed man and stared at peppery Jim Halliday like he was just waking from a bad dream.

"I don't know what you're talking about, Jim," he managed after he got over his first surprise.

"The hell you don't!" Jim Halliday snapped. "If you're trying to tell me the men workin' the hills back of my place ain't Boxed G men you're crazy. They drove a bunch of Lazy H and Boxed G stuff off my range onto yours. I had enough stealing around my place and I'm putting a stop to it right now."

"Did you see any of my men workin' there?" Long Tom demanded.

"No! But I saw the trail they left and I followed it. I found a Lazy H calf that had been left behind too. Besides, who but a thievin' Boxed G man would be driving stock onto your range?"

Long Tom had fully recovered from his first surprise. Now he was getting mad. His face was a sickly gray and his shaggy browed eyes were beginning to bite. Jim Halliday was going too far.

"I wouldn't take a thing like that off no man," Big Bill Plount put in from down the bar. He was a paunchy fat man and a near neighbor of the two men. He had said all along that if trouble broke out between these two he would be caught in the middle.

"And I ain't taking it either," Long Tom growled. "There ain't been a Boxed G man on Lazy H range in ten year. And, by God, when I get through there won't even be a Lazy H any more."

He went for his gun then, but Sheriff Tim George left his chair at the poker table, took one long-legged jump and had Long Tom by the arm.

"There'll be no killin' in this town while I can help it," Sheriff Tom snapped. "Give me that gun, Long Tom. You, too, Jim Halliday. Shuck out!"

Tim George had been sheriff for two years. Black haired, black eyed, trim, some said he had Mexican blood in him, but no one knew for sure. He never had much to say about himself.

In a flash he had both guns. Then he stepped back. "Now if you men got anything to say to each other, go ahead. But there'll be no killin'."

"He called me a rustler," Long Tom rasped. "And no sharp eyed, sawed-off son is going to do that and get away with it."

He charged Jim Halliday like a long geared roaring bull. Jim stood his ground and almost knocked Long Tom flat with a left cross to the jaw.

For years after that, Shady Rest talked about the Long Tom Gearhart-Jim Halliday fist fight. Long Tom had the better of it in height, but Jim Halliday was a little the heavier so that made it about even. Both were saddle-hard, tough and about thirty-five years old.

The bunch pushed back the chairs, made a circle and let them go to it.

For a full minute they stood toe to toe slugging it out. Long Tom got a cut lip and spit out one tooth. Jim Halliday's nose was pouring blood down his upper lip and one eye was beginning to redden and puffily close.

Then Long Tom got in a wild swing that sent Jim Halliday staggering clear back into the crowd. Bill Blount caught him as he fell, histed him to his feet and shoved him back into the fight.

Long Tom got in another swing—a hard one—and Jim Halliday went down for keeps.

"That's enough steam," Sheriff Tim said, and stepped between them. "Bartender, throw a bucket of water on Jim. Long Tom, you come with me."

He led Long Tom outside and gave him his gun. "Buckle it on and ride," he ordered. "If you're around in twenty minutes I'll jail you. Maybe when you two cool off and think things over you'll be all right."

Bill Blount came outside then. "Hell, Sheriff," he said gruffly, "you can't cool catamounts off by makin' 'em fight. Jim

Halliday is already on his feet swearing he'll kill Long Tom as soon as he lays eyes on him."

"Not if I'm around, he won't," Sheriff Tom snapped. "Ride, Tom. I'll tend to Jim."

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POP WARREN, puckered, twisted and tough, had been ramrod to Long Tom's daddy. He was more like a member of the family than the Boxed G ramrod.

"No," he said around his big chew, when Long Tom asked him if there'd been Boxed G men on Lazy H range, "they ain't been a one except a rep at roundup. Anyway, Boxed G stock is too well bred to run in that damn' brush patch Jim Halliday calls a range."

"Then who was it?" Long Tom asked.

"If it was me I'd ask Jim Halliday," the older man said succinctly.

Long Tom frowned. "If I go over there somebody will get killed. I was mad enough to have killed Jim in town and I think he'd have killed me, too. But I don't want a war and I don't think Jim does either. I'll stay away, but I'm going up in the hills and have a look at them steer tracks for myself."

Long Tom had his saddle gun in the crook of his arm as he rode through the brush and trees in the hilly brakes of the Lazy H. So far he had found no evidence of a driven herd in the area.

He was swinging down out of the hills toward the flat country when a sudden crashing in the brush made him rein up and thumb back the hammer on his gun.

A second later a brindle cow with a Boxed G on her side, flashed across a cleared space in the brush farther down the hill and plunged from sight on the other side of the clearing. Right behind her was a calf, running hard. Behind the calf was a brush popper with a spread loop.

The calf was half way across the clearing when the brush popper's loop picked up its hind leg and threw it sprawling.

In a trice the man had the calf tied, had kicked together a pile of leaves and twigs and was heating his iron.

The Boxed G cow was Long Tom Gearhart's. The brush popper's horse wore a Lazy H brand and even from here Long Tom could see the Lazy H burned on the man's saddle. The short swarthy brush popper was a stranger to Long Tom.

Long Tom's eyes began to bite, but he sat his saddle waiting till the man had run his brand, then rode from cover.

"I'll take a look at that brand, cowboy," Long Tom said grimly. "Since the cow had a Boxed G, I suppose the calf has too."

The man whirled, crouching, his hand on his gun butt.

One glance at the calf was enough. The brand was Lazy H.

"Where I come from they kill rustlers without a trial," Long Tom said grimly. "But I'll give you a chance. Shuck that gun. You're going to town."

For answer the man threw himself sideways, twisting and drawing as he fell. His gun was scarcely out of the holster when Long Tom killed him.

Quitting his saddle Long Tom blotted the fresh Lazy H brand and put on his Boxed G. Then he freed the calf and watched it run into the brush after its mother. After that, he turned to the dead man.

"That was as neat a piece of rustling as I've seen in a long time. And don't make a move, Tom Gearhart."

Long Tom straightened. He was standing over the dead man, the still hot running iron in his hand. Jim Halliday, Sheriff Tim George and Bill Blount were riding from the brush. Bill Blount was wearing a deputy's badge. They all had their guns in their hands.

"Tim, I told you I'd been losing stock," Jim Halliday went furiously on, "but I didn't think Long Tom had sunk that low. He just killed one of my men—on my own range. And you both saw that calf with a fresh Boxed G brand. Tom ought to be hung right here and now, but I reckon you'll want to take him up to law, eh, Tim?"

Sheriff Tim George quit his saddle and walked toward Long Tom. "I never thought it of you, Tom," he said.

Long Tom Gearhart got his breath. "Sheriff, you got it all wrong," he managed shortly. "That calf was with a Boxed G cow. I saw this Lazy H man throw it and put his brand on it. When I rode up he tried to kill me. But he didn't."

"Huh!" Jim Halliday snorted. "That's a likely yarn. We saw the calf run for the brush. It had your brand on it. There's one of my men dead. Somebody was runnin' Lazy H and Boxed G stock toward your range. I told you to stay off my place and I find you here like this. Long Tom, you're not only a murderer and rustler, but you're a damn' liar."

"Get out of that saddle and say that," Long Tom shouted. "I'll kill you!"

Sheriff Tim George took a hand. "Looks like Jim has the law on his side, Long Tom," he put in. "We come out here to see where those cattle had been run this morning. We found it and they'd been scattered on Boxed G range."

"That's right, Tom," Bill Blount said. "We found 'em. Lazy H stock with 'em."

"—and I didn't see any blotted brand on that calf," Tim George finished.

"You catch that cow and you'll see it," Long Tom said desperately.

"By now that cow and calf are so far gone you'd never find 'em in these hills. Besides," the sheriff tried to explain, "even that wouldn't prove all your story. A jury might say you put the H on then blotted it and added your Boxed G. Nope, Tom, I've got to take you in for trial and that's flat."

Despite his hot protests, Long Tom was taken to town, searched, booked and locked into a cell. Word got around and that evening Long Tom looked out his barred window just as Pop Warren and a dozen Boxed G men rode into town and tied their horses across the street.

Every man of the dozen wore two six-shooters, carried a rifle and had his belt filled with shells. From the way they acted it was easy to see they were primed for trouble.

The sheriff let Pop come in to see Long Tom but he kept the others outside.

Pop put his chew in the other thin cheek and spit in the corner. "We're loaded for Lazy H men," he told Long Tom. "We ain't going to stand for this."

"You kill just one Lazy H man," Long Tom said grimly, "and we'll have a range war on our hands. I don't want a war. I want justice. A bunch of Lazy H men rode into town ten minutes ago. A lot of them are strangers to me. Who are they?"

Pop shrugged. "Jim Halliday is shorthanded. He's been hirin' every saddle bum that comes along."

"Some of them may be gunslicks," Long Tom said thoughtfully. "You better get your men out of town before somebody starts a fight."

"Sure," Pop said flatly, "that's what we're here for. Then we'll peel this damn' jail offn you."

"You get out of town pronto!" Long Tom ordered. "And no shooting—if you can help it."

Pop looked at Long Tom for a long time.

then turned on his heel and went out. Long Tom watched through the barred window and saw Pop get his men together and start across the street toward the horses.

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IT WAS then Long Tom saw the man step from a shadowed doorway down the street. Something warned him that this was the trouble he wanted to avoid. War! He opened his lips to shout at Pop. But before the sound came out the man had whipped out his six-shooter and fired. A Boxed G man stopped in midstride, took one stumbling step and went down in the street.

As he fired the man whirled for the black shadows of the doorway. And as he did, Long Tom got a good look at the man's face. He was another stranger, but Long Tom had a good memory for faces.

The shot had not stopped echoing from the building fronts when Pop Warren shouted. "That was Lazy H lead, men. Clean the rustlers out!"

Boxed G men took cover. Lazy H men spread out. In a second the street was one wall of darting flame and singing lead. It was war—war that would spread to the range and cost dozens of lives before it was finished.

Long Tom shouted himself hoarse trying to get Pop Warren's ear and tell him to lead the Boxed G men out of town.

But the leathery old ramrod was hunkered in a doorway emptying his six-shooter at a Lazy H man in another hideout down the street.

Then as Long Tom screamed his loudest at Pop, Pop darted from cover and waved "come on" to the Boxed G men. They swarmed from cover. But now, ducking and dodging, they started for the Lazy H men, shooting as they went.

Powder smoke hung heavy on the air. The scream of dying men, the snort and kick of frightened horses and the savage cursing of some man as he got a flesh wound, filled the town.

Through it all Sheriff Tim George plunged with a weapon in each hand. Bullets were whistling all around him as he jumped into the middle of the street and yelled for the fight to stop. "In the name of the Law!"

His heavy voice did stop it and the sudden quiet was enough to hurt a man's ears.

"All you Boxed G men get out of town right now," Sheriff Tim ordered. "I'll keep the Lazy H here till I can talk some sense into their heads, then I'll be out to the Boxed G and give you damn' fools a little of the same. Further, I'll kill the first man that pulls a gun. Get out—all of you. We're not havin' any war here."

"Then hang that murderin' Lazy H crew!" Pop screamed in righteous wrath. "They caused Long Tom to be locked up for some of their own crookedness. Then they kilt one Boxed G man as we were leavin' the town peaceable. Hang 'em all! They're all guilty!"

"I'll hang the guilty man when I catch him," Sheriff Tim promised. "Now get out, Pop, before somebody else gets killed."

"When you catch him," Pop sneered sourly. "They're *all* guilty as hell and we'll take care of 'em for you."

With that old Pop started shooting again. A Lazy H man who had come from cover, went down. Instantly blazing guns lighted the street like winking fireflies.

Sheriff Tim was a prudent man. He took cover in the jail, then came back to Long Tom's cell.

"Think you can stop that fight, Tom?" he asked. "I heard you shoutin' at Pop."

"I can get the Boxed G men out of town," Long Tom promised. "If I was out of here. I don't want any war."

Sheriff Tim unlocked the cell door. "If you'll promise not to carry a gun, nor to go on Lazy H range, nor to leave the country till you're tried, I'll let you out. They ain't five other men in the country I'd do that to, Long Tom. But I want that shootin' stopped quick."

"It's a promise," Long Tom said solemnly. "I'll stop it."

"Then get out," Sheriff Tim said. "And don't get hurt."

Long Tom ducked out the back door, rounded the building and peered down the street. Four men lay in the dust now. How many more were in doorways, there was no way of telling. But he saw Pop, crouched across the street, shooting.

A dozen long legged leaps and he had the scrawny old Boxed G man by the shoulder. "Stop it!" Long Tom ordered grimly.

"Call the men. We're getting out of town fast."

Pop looked around. "So you got out," he said. "Then it's time we were ridin' before the sheriff gets a posse and grabs you again. How'd you do it, break out?"

Long Tom nodded. If that explanation satisfied Pop, it was all right with him.

Pop's high pitched yell sounded in the street even above the roll of gunfire. It drew the Boxed G into a side street. From there they made a rush for their horses and got out of town fast.

Long Tom was on one of the dead cowboys' horses when Pop swung alongside him. There was real concern in the wizened old ramrod's voice as he explained his part in the fight and that concern brought a soft lump to Long Tom Gearhart's throat as he rode along.

Pop Warren had the welfare of the Boxed G and Long Tom uppermost in his big heart and everything he did was done for the good of one or the other. His was a loyalty that would carry through even after death.

Long Tom reached out a big bony hand and put it on Pop's thin shoulder. No words were needed here. Silence meant much more.

Then suddenly that silence was filled with the spang of a bushwhacker's rifle. Long Tom felt Pop's body stiffen, then tremble under his hand. A moment later the old man sighed and started sagging on his saddle horn. He would have hit the ground if Long Tom had not kept a tight hold on him.

The other Boxed G men sat, paralyzed for the split part of a second, then quit their saddles in headlong dives for cover. But Long Tom sat there gripping Pop's shoulder in his big hand, and felt Pop's life blood slip between his fingers.

As it did Long Tom's color faded until it was almost the same as Pop's. His teeth set. His eyes flashed across the spot where the shot had come from.

Already Boxed G men were there searching for Pop Warren's killer. They came back. "Nobody there, Tom," they reported. "He lit out."

Long Tom nodded. "We'll go home now," he said.

They dug a grave for Pop out under the big cottonwoods on the hill overlooking the house, and as the sun came up, they buried him there where he liked to sit and whittle and spit. As the last shovel full of dirt was put in place and tenderly tamped down, Long Tom picked up Pop's cartridge belt and six-shooter and buckled it on.

"I promised the sheriff," he said solemnly to the bareheaded men gathered around, "that I wouldn't carry a gun; that I wouldn't leave Boxed G range; that I would stop this war; and that I wouldn't ride on Lazy H range till this thing could be straightened out.

"But, by God, the skunk that killed Old Pop deserves hanging and I'm going to see that he gets it."

He turned his back on Pop's grave and walked stiffly down to the big house. It was late afternoon when he came out with a hammer in his hip pocket and a big bundle under his arm. Pop's gun was still strapped to his hips.

Long Tom caught his horse, saddled and started toward town. About once each mile he stopped and tacked a hand-made poster on a tree. The poster read:

> I will pay one thousand dollars cash and no questions asked for the name of the Lazy H man who shot Pop Warren in the back.
> Long Tom Gearhart.

In town he put a poster on the back bar of each of the saloons, then he tacked one on the sheriff's door.

By then it was dark so he went to Cassidy's for a drink and to see if the evening brought results.

It did.

About ten o'clock a man came in and stopped at Long Tom's elbow. "There's a man out in the alley wants to see you, Long Tom. He says it's about that poster you tacked up."

Long Tom looked the man over carefully. "Who is it?" he said.

The man, another stranger to Long Tom, shrugged. "He didn't give his name."

"Why don't he come inside?" Long Tom demanded suspiciously.

"You'll have to ask him that," the stranger said. "I just brought you the word. That's all I know." He turned and went out.

Long Tom stared at his glass for a moment. The thing had all the earmarks of a Lazy H trap. He didn't like it. But he'd

gone this far. He had no intention of backing down now.

Sliding Old Pop's gun around where it was easy to reach he went to the back door and stepped quickly through, jerking it shut before his tall body, in the shaft of light, gave the man a target. He stood there a moment blinking his eyes against the darkness, one hand on his gun, then he made out a horsebacker riding slowly toward him.

The man was hunched in his saddle, his old black hat pulled low over his face and his coat collar turned up till only the tip of his nose was visible.

"You Long Tom Gearhart?" he asked. His voice was muffled by the coat collar and obviously disguised. But Long Tom sensed something familiar about the man.

"I am," Long Tom said warily. "What do you want?"

"You put up a lot of posters offerin' a thousand dollars cold and no questions asked for the name of the man who killed Pop Warren?"

"I did and I'll pay when I get the proof."

"I don't know which man did it," the stranger said. "But I can tell you where there will be five men tonight. One of those five men did the job. That good enough to get the reward?"

"It is—if one of the five turns out to be the killer. Who are you?"

"I don't want my name brought into this," the stranger said, "and I ain't givin' it out—till later. But when you get Pop's killer I'll be around for the money."

Long Tom stared hard at the man. For the life of him he could not quite pick out what was familiar about the hunched figure.

"There's a hell of a lot of strangers around this country all of a sudden," Long Tom said suspiciously. "How do I know this ain't a trap. A Lazy H trap?"

The man shrugged again. "You'll have to take my word it ain't. But I wouldn't send you into a trap. I don't want you killed off till I get my thousand."

"That's right," Long Tom admitted. "But if I don't know who you are how will I know when I'm payin' the thousand to the right man? And how do you know I'll pay you if you are right?"

"When I claim the money I'll hold out my left hand to shake hands with you. And I ain't afraid but what you'll pay me. Long Tom Gearhart has the reputation of keeping his word."

"Thanks," Long Tom said dryly. "Where is this place?"

"Know that clump of maples a half mile north of the Lazy H ranchhouse? They'll be there at one o'clock tonight and you'll have to ride if you beat them there."

AN ALL-STAR LINE-UP of authors who have the knack of "Bringing the Old West Back to Life" is featured in the October DIME WESTERN! You'll want to read gripping stories by such masters of Western fiction as Walt Coburn, Harry F. Olmsted, Cliff Farrell, Tom W. Blackburn and others! On your newsstand August 4th!

"I know the trees," Long Tom answered.

Long Tom watched him till he hit the end of the alley and was silhouetted against the street lights. The man was definitely familiar, but still Long Tom did not know who he was.

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LONG TOM did not have long to wait when he got safely into the clump of maples the stranger had mentioned. He had left his horse well away from the meeting place and crept carefully in to avoid being seen. Nevertheless he knew he had been seen.

There was a feel in the back of his neck that he was being watched. A feel that made him uneasy and tight. He was fair bait here for the first piece of Lazy H lead that came his way.

He could see the five men now, dim shadows, as they rode over the hill at a canter and came on toward the trees. As they rode into the blacker shadows, Long Tom left his hiding place back of the tree.

They had quit their saddles and were arguing about something. As Long Tom

moved closer he heard Big Bill Blount's high pitched voice say:

"But, dammit, your ideas have all been a flop so far. It's time we tried mine."

"But the risk," Sheriff Tim George said, "ain't worth it. I don't want to hang and if somebody catches us at this we'll have both the Lazy H and the Boxed G down on us like a ton of rocks."

"Tryin' to back out, eh?" Bill Blount sneered. "Right when we're fixed to get both places. You mark my words, when we burn the Lazy H ranch-house we'll start this war goin' till hell can't stop it. After they've finished each other off we'll move in. They'd have done it when Jim Halliday caught Long Tom with that branded calf if you'd have left them alone."

"And have some Boxed G man ride in on us redhanded, I suppose," the sheriff said sourly. "Old Pop had some men in those hills looking for tracks. I asked him. I'm trying to play this thing safe and we have so far. I thought everything was all set when I let Tom out of jail. I didn't think he'd take his men out of town.

"I put on that play in the saloon just to build things up for us. But Tom and Jim don't want a war."

Long Tom, from where he stood back of the tree, was beginning to burn.

"People around here like Long Tom," the sheriff went on, "and Jim Halliday too. We've got to be mighty careful. Both the Lazy H and the Boxed G are watching their places close. I bet there's guards around those Lazy H buildings right now."

"I thought of all that," Bill Blount answered, "and I told the Kid to see where the guards are and let me know. He ought to be here now. Nobody can catch us that way."

"You're caught right now," Long Tom said grimly, and stepped from cover. His gun was in his hand. "And I don't know when I ever caught a meaner, dirtier gang."

"Good God!" the sheriff gasped. "Tom!"

"And that ain't all," Jim Halliday called as he stepped from behind a tree on the other side of them. "The Lazy H is here too, you skunks. Grab!"

Long Tom had no time to be surprised that Jim Halliday was there for guns were out, spitting flame and lead. Long Tom saw his first bullet knock down a B-Bar-B man, then felt lead jar against his own ribs, making him stagger. Jim Halliday was walking straight toward the men, shooting as he went. Sheriff George went down.

Long Tom had his eyes on Pop Warren's killer. Big Bill Blount was shooting at Jim then. Long Tom yelled:

"Turn around, you pot-bellied skunk!"

Bill Blount whirled, shooting as he spun. Long Tom killed him then. Big Bill grunted as three bullets hit his belly. He dropped his gun, then fell dead.

Jim Halliday had killed another B-Bar-B man. The third one ran; they let him go.

Long Tom held his gun on Jim Halliday until Jim came up and put out his left hand. "I'll take that thousand now, Long Tom."

"You!" Long Tom gasped.

Jim grinned. "One and the same. I'd have told you who I was but I was afraid you would start shooting at the first Lazy H man you laid eyes on."

"I'll be busted!" Long Tom exploded. "How did you know?"

"I was mad when I had you arrested, but I didn't want any war. When I heard who the man was that started the shooting in town that night I called him on the carpet. They called him the Kid. It took a little persuadin' but he finally 'fessed up. Bill Blount knew I was shorthanded so he sent some men over for me to hire. They were in Bill's pay. They drove those cattle onto your range."

"The Kid told me of this meeting here tonight. They figured if you wouldn't go to war for Old Pop, then burning the Lazy H sure would start it."

"It not only started it, it finished it," Long Tom said prayerfully. "I'll send you that thousand tomorrow, Jim."

"You'll do nothing of the kind," Jim Halliday snapped. "You'll buy Old Pop a tombstone with it."

"I'll do it," Long Tom agreed, "and I'll add another thousand to it myself."

That is how Pop Warren happened to have the biggest, finest tombstone west of the Mississippi.

Battle-Call of the Branding Iron

In ancient days a suit of armor cost eighteen oxen, and from six to ten head was paid for a wife. . . . Reason enough why cattle-rustling had flourished through the ages before it reached its dramatic peak on our Western frontier.

Cattle ranchers began helping themselves to all loose cattle.

By JOE E. DASH

RUSTLING, branding, and the cattle industry, began almost with the human race. Accounts of these trades are found in the oldest written records of the Egyptians, Hindus, and Arabs. And the wealth of these ancients was estimated mostly by the extent of their cattle herds, especially the Arabs, whose riches were always measured by the number of their camels.

In Homeric days, a suit of armor was worth about eighteen oxen; and from six to ten oxen was given for a wife. The Greeks made breast plates of two to four inches in thicknesses of an ox hide, in order to protect themselves against the spears and arrows of the Trojans. While besieging Troy, the Greek soldiers became rustlers and stole cattle mainly for their hides.

In ancient times cattle were also used as a medium of exchange, or even as money, before that medium of exchange was coined. The origin of the word cattle is *pecus*, meaning money. One of the derivations is the word pecuniary. When money was first coined from metal, the ancients stamped on each coin the image of an ox. And after several thousand years, we too followed in

their footsteps by stamping the image of a buffalo on the nickel on one side; and the image of the red man on the reverse side. The Indian could be classed as the rustler of the buffalo.

Cattle rustling began about the time these animals became valuable as a food supply; when their hides were in demand.

The first cattle rustlers on the North American continent were pirates of the Spanish Main. All breeds of cattle were brought into the New World from Spain, and when the rustling Spaniards settled in the West Indies, in the Floridas, and had conquered Mexico, cattle ranches began to take form. Gradually, cattle herds from the West Indies were taken to the Floridas, then driven into Louisiana and into the Mississippi Valley, and from Mexico to Tejas—the former Mexican province now know as Texas.

For about two centuries, after the discovery of the West Indies, these places became resorts for pirates on the Spanish Main, and there arose a class called *boucaniers,* who supplied the pirate vessels with beef. Some of these so-called *boucanier* cattle ranchers had quit the pirate business for the safer work of raising cattle. Little ranches were started near the coast line where it was convenient to passing ships. Finally, these cattle ranchers found it was cheaper to steal cattle than it was to raise them. Consequently they raided neighboring ranches, and became the first rustlers on the North American continent.

Cattle rustling also began in the colonies about the same time.

When the Dutch colonists settled in New York, and the English colonists settled in Virginia, herds were brought over from Holland and from England, but the Indians, resenting the influx of the white settlers, drove their cattle away.

When rustling was at its height in the Floridas and in Louisiana, there arose many vigilante committees under a general leader. These chieftains were known as regulators. When a rustler was caught with cattle, of which he could not give a good account, he was given the usual thirty-nine stripes with a lash, and told to "go West." As Texas was the American frontier, this meant either to New Mexico, Arizona, or California.

Cattle rustling in Texas started shortly after the inception of the American Colonies, which was about 1825. Cattle ranchers began helping themselves to all loose cattle. But the worst offenders in the rustling business in southwest territory, were unquestionably the fierce Apaches. They were the most bloodthirsty of all the cattle rustlers. They had two objects—to kill the white man, and to steal his cattle. The Apaches had been badly treated by the conquering Spaniards, and for the wrongs inflicted upon them by the Spanish government, the Apaches tortured and killed both the American and the Spanish settlers.

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FINALLY, the United States government sent a division of about five thousand soldiers to quell the Indian uprising. But the Apaches were shrewd and cunning, and at one time had practically surrounded the entire division. The Apaches killed about half of the soldiers before they were finally subdued and placed upon reservations.

Cattle rustling in the West is practically an obsolete art, although some rustling is still being done—especially since the war and the inception of the black market. Until recent years, some of the most famous cattle kings were not above a kind of rustling. The rancher who got the first look at a "slickear" or maverick, put on his brand. It was legitimate enough. It was the unwritten law of the range, and to brand mavericks was everybody's right.

About thirty-five years ago, when I began my cowpunching career, I worked on not a few of the biggest cow outfits in the West—among them the Half Circle, Hatchet brand and Diamond A, ranches of Colorado and Texas, who ranged about seventy thousand head; the Two Dot outfit at Two Dot, Montana, who ranged about twenty-five thousand; the Carey brothers, in northwest Colorado, who ranged about twenty-five thousand head; Miller and Lux, it was said ranged about five hundred thousand head, and old Tarassa of Old Mexico, ranged no less than one million head of cattle.

Some of these cow outfits had a standing offer to its riders, and the boss paid

you two or even three dollars a head, if you could put the company's brand on "outside" mavericks. That is, when a maverick was found, you never asked questions; you just roped him, branded him and, kept tally. If the boss was honest, he gave you that extra two or three dollars. If he was not, he lost some of his own cattle in return. . . .

Strangely enough, Samuel Maverick—who gave birth to the name, maverick—a cattle-king of Texas, who never branded his cattle, gained about as many as he had lost. Samuel Maverick claimed everything on the range that wore hair and which bore his mark—that is, no brand. In short, Samuel Maverick worked a clean riata as much as the other dog-eat-dog cow outfits worked a hungry rope. Perhaps Samuel Maverick was moved by pity for the animals, for branding seems to be a cruel practice to some people. Branding, was, however, the only sure way to mark cattle on the range. And the system of branding cattle was actually an ultimatum on the rustler proper, who, when caught, was led to the nearest tree.

In ancient times branding was inflicted on criminals as a punishment. The Romans branded criminals who were condemned to fight lions in the gladiatorial arena. The Romans also branded vagabonds, gypsies and those persons they considered generally obnoxious. In Old England, criminals were also branded. It was from this cruel custom that the cattle barons of Texas got the idea of marking cattle. And the spread of rustling led to the necessary branding of cattle in all western states.

The original longhorn strain of cattle—with the exception of a few small private herds—has long been extinct, but the rustler has had other prey.

The origin of the term rustler as applied to a cattle-thief is about as vague and confusing as the origin of his business. The word rustler means an industrious person, one who rustles and bargains for trade and business in honest enterprise. When the word rustler is applied to the cattle business it has an opposite meaning of course.

All in all, rustling and branding, and the cattle industry, are as old as sin itself. Rustling and branding began ages ago in the Orient, and spread finally to our own West: the Egyptians, Arabs, the Dutch, the English Colonists, the Spanish conquerors, and lastly, our own western ranchers, all had a hand in a maverick-hungry riata and a running iron.

So much for an art that is as old as time. But the word *pecus* meaning cattle, is still with us, and has not faded into oblivion. Ironically, the word is deeply rooted. You need only recall the time when you'd wander into a meat market, take a slant at a sign that said, beefsteak fifty cents a pound—which might be an old bull critter—and you will agree that it takes a lot of *pecus* to buy *pecus*.

★ "MISSION ACCOMPLISHED!" ★

Those are welcome words when the big bombers come back, leaving behind an enemy war-plant in flames or a wrecked U-boat base. . . . Don't forget, however, that we still have a long way to go before the last such report is in. And it's your money, loaned at fair interest to the government, that helps to make possible those hard-hitting missions of our fighting forces.

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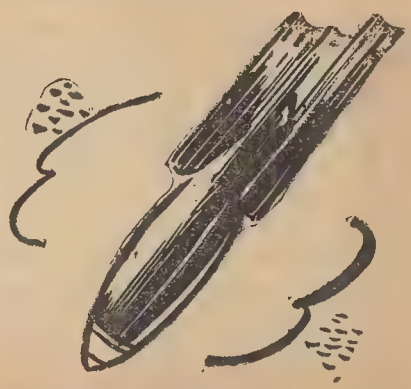
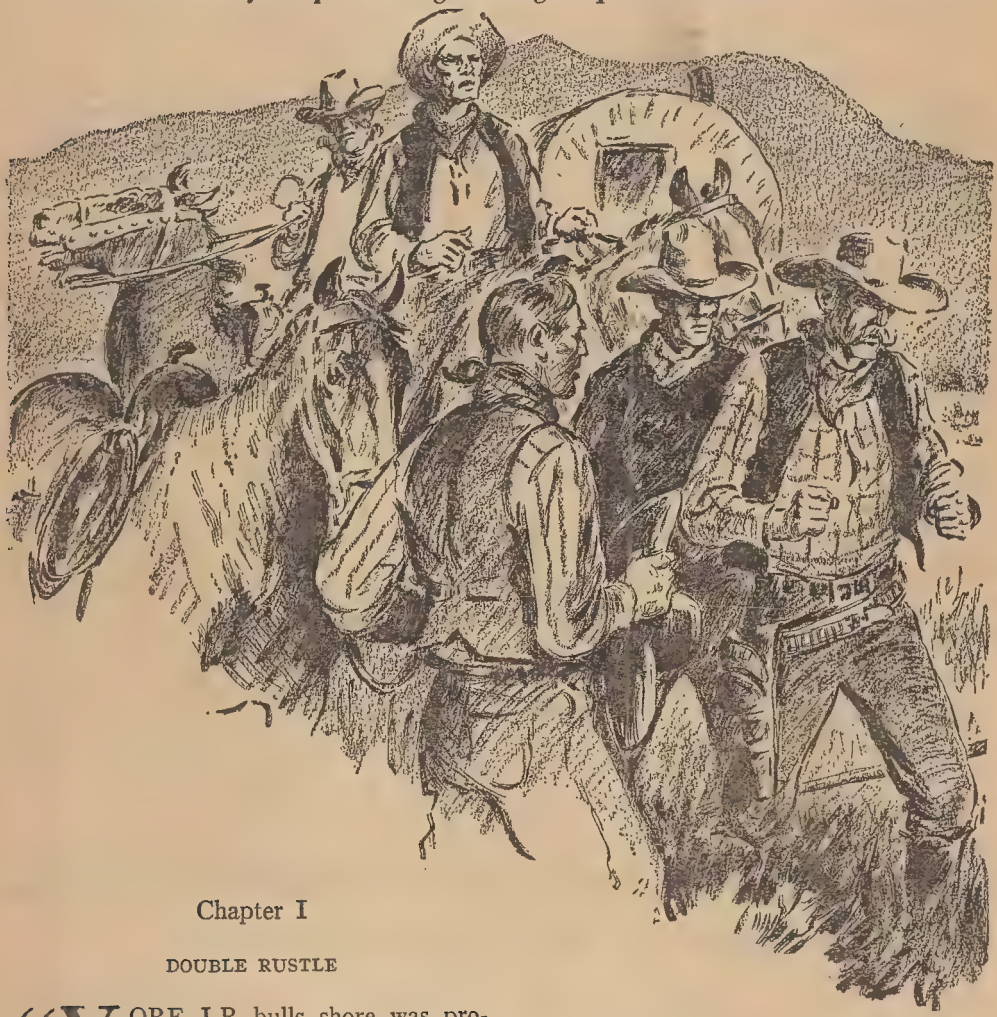


THE J-R RIDES

The Circle Dot boss figured that a get-rich-quick rancher, like the J-R's Flint Newsome, might solve that riddle of his overlarge calf-crop—as a get-hanged-quick rustler!



Chapter I

DOUBLE RUSTLE

"YORE J-R bulls shore was prolific last year," commented Jake Hiram, foreman of the big Circle Dot upper Nueces outfit. "No, sir, I don't believe I ever seen so few bulls and cows produce so many calves in one year." He puffed hard on the corn-shuck cigarette, blew out the smoke and looked over at Flint Newsome, owner of the J-R brand.

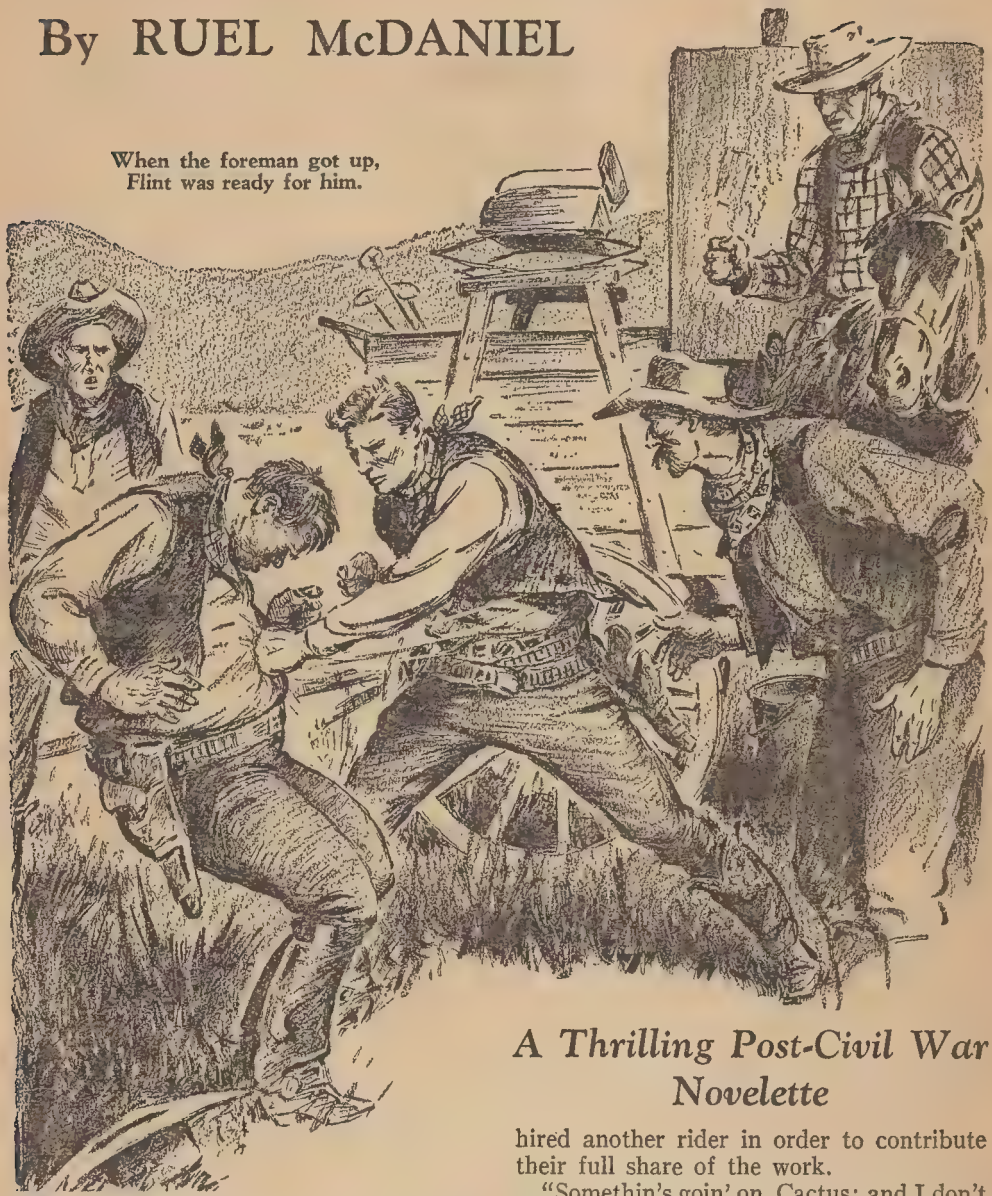
Flint's tanned face reddened under the big foreman's scrutiny and a touch of doubt and uneasiness showed in his mild blue eyes. "Holy crickets if I understand it myself," he said seriously. "Does look like I got more calves with sore brands than I got cows. For a fact, it beats me." He removed his flat-topped black sombrero and slowly wiped sweat from his unruly red hair with a faded red bandana.

Jake Hiram exchanged glances with another Circle Dot rider and they both laughed. Jake touched spurs to his roan and rode on after the lowing herd of wild longhorns.

Old Cactus Jackson pulled his half-wild mustang along side Flint as Jake and his

THE DEATH-WATCH

By RUEL McDANIEL



When the foreman got up, Flint was ready for him.

A Thrilling Post-Civil War Novelette

rider moved away. "I heard what Jake said," the angular, gray-haired top-hand for Flint's J-R spread muttered, "an' I didn't like the sound of same!"

The old cowboy was six feet four and not only Flint's tophand, but his self-appointed guardian as well. He and Flint constituted the crew of the little J-R outfit, except during round-up, when they hired another rider in order to contribute their full share of the work.

"Somethin's goin' on, Cactus; and I don't know what it is. Take that critter over there." He pointed to a gangling calf suckling a cow with a Circle Dot plainly on her hip. "That's our brand on that calf, and I know we didn't burn it there. Looks like somebody is set on building up our herd." Flint fumbled in his doe-skin jacket pocket, pulled out a plug of Brown's Mule and bit off a sizable hunk, then passed it over to

Cactus. "Now who'd be wantin' to build up the J-R spread but us?" He shook his head meditatively. "I'll be a holy cricket if I can understand it."

The circle was drawing tight on the thousands of wild longhorns and their spring calves, and the mesquite jungle crashed as wild, plunging bulls rumbled headlong into the brittle brush, their great horns tangling in the underbrush.

Jackrabbit Creek cut down through the jungle of mesquite, shin-oak and cactus and the valley formed a natural bedding-down spot for the wild herd. Missouri Lunsford, another Nueces rancher, was in charge of the round-up and he had passed the word not to close in on the cattle any more that day. It was nearing sundown now, and Flint and Cactus circled the herd to the camp up the creek.

* * *

Missouri Lunsford was calling out the names of the cowboys from the various spreads to ride circle that night when Flint and Cactus rode up. As they broke through the brush and into the camp ground clearing, Flint noticed that Lunsford momentarily stopped calling out names and everybody looked at the two approaching riders. When Lunsford began calling names again, there was a severe tone in his voice.

"Hi ya, gents," Cactus shouted pleasantly, and the ranchers pretended not to hear.

Flint Newsome's face was a mask, and his blue eyes searched the faces of the neighboring ranchers in a vain hope of finding a welcome smile. So they, too, had seen a lot of calves bearing the J-R brand that day—calves that suckled cows wearing other brands.

He joined the circle of men listening to instructions for bedding down the herd for the night, and some of the smaller ranchers who lived in the vicinity began to walk toward their horses, to ride home for the night. Other owners and cowboys began rousting out blankets from the back-end of chuck wagons or from the pokes behind their saddles.

"I don't think I heard you call mine or Cactus Jackson's name," Flint said to Lunsford. "I have cattle in the herd, so it's only fair that I should furnish a man for the circle tonight, as usual."

Lunsford looked at him for a long time and his lips were grim under a black walrus mustache. "We got all the hands we need tonight, Newsome," he snapped.

"Better make him furnish a man," Jake Hiram said derisively. "He's got more *calves* in there than anybody, seems to me!" He chuckled and two or three Circle Dot rannies laughed with him.

"You've said about enough, Jake!" Flint snapped. "I admit there are calves in the herd bearing my brand that are strange critters to me. The only calves that I've run my iron on are calves sucklin' my cows. And if somebody's tryin' to be funny with my brand, by the holy crickets, I'll find out and—"

"An' what, Mister Newsome? Pay him off?" It was Jake Hiram, and his voice carried taunting accusation.

"If you're accusin' me of runnin' my brand on other men's stock you can eat them words!" Flint leaped from his saddle and Jake Hiram met him half way.

"Oh no, I ain't accusin'," Hiram said sarcastically. "I'm just sayin' some of yore calves are sucklin' Circle Dot cows. Maybe—"

Flint seized the short, beefy man by the collar and shook him like a terrier would shake a half-grown prairie dog.

Hiram jerked from Flint's grasp and swung up with a powerful fist that landed under Flint's chin. It jarred Flint all the way to his heels. He yanked off his black hat and tore into the bigger Circle-Dot foreman with all he had. His wiry body made up in quickness what it lacked in size to match the foreman. He found the bigger man's stomach with a powerful slam of his right fist, and Hiram grunted and doubled as the breath went out of him. Flint's left fist found its mark on the foreman's wide nose. Blood spurted and Hiram snorted like an enraged bull.

He dived headlong at the young rancher, butting him in the pit of the stomach and knocking him backward. Recognizing his advantage, Hiram leaped and fell sprawling on top of Flint, pounding him with both fists in the face.

Momentarily out of breath and partially blind from a blow in one eye, Flint threshed his feet and hands until he managed to twist from under the bigger man. He jabbed his right fist into Hiram's stomach, and the man's grip on his body released

sufficiently for Flint to leap up to his feet.

When the foreman got up, Flint was ready for him. His right fist connected with Hiram's chin. His left jabbed him in the stomach. The foreman folded and sank to the ground. Flint brushed the red hair out of his eyes, felt of a knot above his right eye and turned to the circle of ranchers and cowboys. "Any other gent got anything to say about them—calves?" he asked grimly.

"Look out!" It was old Cactus Jackson's voice. But it was too late to save Flint.

Jake Hiram had eased to his feet, got his breath back and now his sharp-toed boot was aimed straight at Flint's groin. It landed in spite of Cactus' warning. Flint wilted to the ground, a groan escaping his lips.

Jake Hiram leaped on his horse and galloped off into the jungle.

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MISSOURI LUNSFORD came over and helped Cactus lift Flint from the ground and carry him to a chuck-wagon and place him in it.

"Whether a man's a cow-thief or not, it don't give another a right to fight like that," the grim-faced Lunsford said.

"Ye don't think Flint's been runnin' his iron where it don't belong, do ye, Missouri? Not ye, surely?" Cactus asked anxiously.

Lunsford shook his head. "I ain't accusin' nobody," he said. "But they is a lot of J-R calves 'round about."

In a couple of hours, Flint was able to sit his black cow-pony. "You can stick around in camp," he told Cactus. "I'm ridin' over to see Rufus Hawes. All the calves I've seen bearin' my brand and followin' other cows have Rufus' Circle Dot brand. I got to tell him I haven't branded any of his stuff."

Old Cactus grinned crookedly. "Air ye worryin' about what ol' Rufus Hawes thinks, or is it that ye are a mite worried about what his daughter Irene might be thinkin'?"

Flint did not answer, and the old cowboy chuckled.

It was five miles up to the sprawling stone mansion of Major Rufus Hawes. The ride gave Flint time to think, and the situation called for a lot of thinking now, he agreed.

After the ravages of the Civil War, there was not enough left of the hilly homestead for all the Newsome boys, so Flint, the oldest and just under the age of war service, rode out of the red hills of East Texas, on across the Trinity, the Brazos and the muddy Colorado, to find, finally, the sort of country a young man might settle in with a fighting chance of building up something for himself.

He built a little adobe hut just above Jackrabbit Spring, promptly dubbed it Jackrabbit Roost, and began working toward getting a little herd of longhorns together. He worked for the Kings awhile, saved his money and learned the ways of the Nueces country cattlemen, found that the wild, unbranded longhorns were the property of any man who corraled them. By exchanging work with neighboring ranchers, helping them also to corral the wild longhorns, he managed to build up a herd of nearly a hundred bulls and cows wearing the J-R brand.

The open range, he learned on his long ride from beyond the Trinity, was slowly but certainly becoming a thing of the past. He knew it would hit the Nueces country soon, and he wanted to be prepared for it. So he filed on a section of good range land surrounding Jackrabbit Spring. Pretty soon he hired Cactus Jackson, and he had Cactus file on an adjoining section. Like other ranchers of the district, he ranged his herds wherever grass was best. The range was open and most of it was owned by the state. With his section and the section belonging to old Cactus, he hoped to establish a foundation. Then as land was placed on the market by the state, he hoped to buy up a section at a time until he had enough to assure him a profitable spread when fencing hit the country and there was no more free range.

Some of his neighbors mildly resented his new-fangled ideas, but a lot of others followed suit. They backed Flint's judgment by filing claims on their own lands and looking to the time when there would be an end to free range.

That a lot of the small ranchers had to look to Flint's Jackrabbit Spring for water did not seem to worry them, and for that

Flint was grateful. It made a man feel good to know that his neighbors trusted in his fairness. A dam right below the springs could cut water off from several spreads down Jackrabbit Creek, and the nearest water would be the Nueces, down the creek ten miles, or the few shallow wells scattered over the country to supply the ranch houses with drinking water.

Major Rufus Hawes, Flint remembered, had been more fortunate than most Texas ranchers. After the Civil War, he came back to his Circle Dot spread to find it practically intact, except for the break-up of his herd, which of course was to be expected. Herds going untended for four years accounted in part for the thousands of wild, unbranded critters in the mesquite thickets up and down the Nueces.

Rufus Hawes was the biggest operator in the Jackrabbit Creek sector and one of the biggest in the upper Nueces country, and his fine rock mansion stood as a sort of monument to the acumen of the major in his pre-war days. The major, however, could not see eye to eye with Flint regarding the future of the country, and he resisted with all his power the encroachment of private ownership and the breaking-up of free range. The range was God's gift to man, he said, and no individual had a right to claim any part of it as his own. It was there for the man with the greater amount of cattle to use it the most, he argued. The Circle Dot brand rode on the flanks of cattle that ranged as far as twenty-five miles from Circle Dot headquarters. He drove a lot of cattle overland to Indianola and shipped them to packers in New Orleans. Some people in the Nueces country said he owned an interest in the packing outfit.

Chapter II

DEAD MEN TELL NO TALES

WHITE clouds drifted low from the Gulf of Mexico and the wind whipped them into vanishing mist as they flew north. Flint shivered a little inside as he remembered that this was tropical hurricane weather and he recalled the havoc the storm of two years ago had wrought as it left the Gulf and skitted across the Nueces country.

The sight of the big rock house of Rufus Hawes, squatting there in the moonlight atop a gentle slope, vanished all thought of the storm and it brought a quickening to his pulse. He saw a candlelight in the big living room and another candle flickered on the wide front porch.

As he drew nearer, he saw three figures sitting on the porch, and before he was close enough to distinguish one from another, he knew one would be Irene Hawes. That drove from his mind for the moment the events of the day and he involuntarily touched his black to quicken the pace.

He rode to the front gate, climbed down and tossed his reins over a post. As he opened the gate, he saw Jake Hiram gaze instantly toward him, then get out of a chair and hurriedly go into the house. Rufus Hawes sat there, rocking back and forth slowly. Irene sat very still, and Flint thought there was an unnatural tenseness about her as he walked to the steps.

"Howdy, folks," Flint said, removing his black Stetson. "Looks like maybe there's a storm brewin' in the Gulf."

"Come in, Newsome," Major Hawes said, rising. He was a tall erect man with white hair and a short-clipped mustache. He looked like a man who did not get enough sunshine, and there was a bleakness in his pale blue eyes as though he might be afraid to look back at the post.

"Good evening," Irene Hawes said, and her eyes did not meet Flint's. She was a small girl of nineteen, and she owned Flint Newsome from the first moment she looked at him out of those soft blue eyes from coal-black lashes. Flint sensed the tenseness in her at once.

"Have a chair, Newsome," the major invited.

Flint pulled the chair out from the wall and sat down, a feeling of nervousness running through him. He cleared his throat. "Something happened today durin' the round-up," he began haltingly. "I can't understand it, not at all. I just rode up to tell you I didn't run—"

"Oh, that!" the major said with an awkward wave of his hand. "Just forget it, boy. With so many men branding and the hurry and bustle and all in connection with the round-up, anything might happen. Think nothing of it. If you feel that some of my calves have your brand, why we can

settle up, anyway you like, when we sell next year."

"Whew!" Flint expostulated. "That's mighty white of you, Major, to see it that way. I shore appreciate it. It had me worried. Of all people to suspect me of pullin' something, I wanted you to be the last!" He ran his bandana over his face.

"Excuse me!" Irene suddenly got up and almost ran into the house.

Rufus Hawes saw the cloud come over Flint's face and he said, "Just a little upset. Jake was blowing off about the calves and your brand and all. You know how women are. Don't pay any attention." He laughed.

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MAJOR HAWES had ordered five hundred steers cut out of the herd, for sale to New Orleans. By the time the sun was showing crimson in the west, branding fires were dying down and the ranchers were nearing the end of the cutting-out process. The wild herd was milling and threatening to break and the cowmen rode about in a sort of strained calmness.

When Flint galloped up to the chuck wagons from a three-hour round-up with a couple of boys from one of the down-creek spreads to haze out a bunch of critters that had escaped the tightening ring, Cactus Jackson rode out to meet him. But even before Cactus rode within hailing distance, Flint saw a bunch of about a hundred cattle and a lot of calves, cut off from the main herd and milling through the brush under the close-riding of a bunch of cowboys. Some of the critters he recognized as his.

"What's our cattle cut out for? We ain't aimin' to sell anything till spring. We're driving' up the trail next year," Flint told Cactus, apprehension rising in his voice. The cowboys with him touched their mounts and rode on.

"That's what I wanted to tell ye," Cactus Jackson said. "I didn't have nothin' to do with cuttin' 'em out. It was somebody else's idear!"

The muscles in Flint's lean cheeks twitched as he spurred his black toward a group of men in a close-knot near the chuck-wagons. He ground-tied his mount fairly leaped toward the group. His mouth and fairly leaped toward the group. His mouth was open to utter a question, when Peter Collins, owner of the X-2 brand, with headquarters down Jackrabbit Creek about six miles from Flint, halted him.

"Newsome, we got together," he said firmly but a little sheepishly, "an' we decided we can't use the same range with a gent whose brand crops up on calves that foller other men's cows!"

"Look here, Peter, you're a fair-minded man," Flint demanded, "do you honestly think I've been runnin' my J-R where it don't belong? Honestly?"

The rancher's eyes shifted from Flint's burning gaze. "Wa'al, all I gotta say is, I found two o' my calves today with yore J-R on 'em!"

The small ranchers and cowboys drew a knot around Flint, and the look in their eyes was not friendly. "He's right, Newsome. We don't mix with skunks on this range!" That was a small rancher from down near where the Jackrabbit empties into the Nueces.

"Yore cattle—stolen calves an' all—are

cut out. You can take 'em and git!" Collins exclaimed, and he seemed relieved that he finally had got it out of his system.

Flint trembled inside, and it showed on his face and in his hands. These men had been his friends; he had ridden the range with them for six years now. Yet they were turning on him like a pack of wolves and ordering him out of his ranch and home. Why, he'd come there ahead of most of them.

"I didn't run my iron on any calf that didn't belong to me. If somebody ran it for me, I can't help that—right now. I can tell you lily-livered gents that if you don't want to run on the same range with me, you better cut out yore own herds and vamoose. I'm stayin'!"

When he started to leave, men moved back and made an opening in the circle for him. He strode to his horse, mounted and called to Cactus.

He galloped down to where his cattle were being held. "Release them critters!" he shouted to the cowboys. When nobody moved, he jerked out two old-fashioned five-shot Colts. "I said release the cattle!" And then the cowboys reluctantly rode away, leaving the wild animals to break out of the circle at will.

"Bad boy, eh?" It was the grating voice of Jake Hiram. He passed on his way to the chuck-wagons, and a grinning leer was on his round face.

Flint and Cactus had ridden about a mile toward their adobe shack at Jackrabbit Spring when a pounding of hoofs from behind caused them to draw rein. When Flint looked back, he saw Jesus Gonzales, vaquero for Missouri Lunsford, galloping toward them. Jesus glanced back furtively every few seconds.

"Señor Flint," Jesus half-whispered, nearly out of breath. "I hear what has happen. Mebbe I'm watched now, so can't stay. But you meet me at dusk at twin oaks, down-creek from your place. I tell you somet'ing mebbe help. Adios now!" He wheeled his flea-bitten mare and rode hurriedly back down the trail.

Jesus had come into the Jackrabbit Creek section two years ago, half starved and without money. Flint had fed him for two weeks and had helped him get a riding berth with Missouri.

At a wide bend in the rough wagon road, Flint and Cactus took a short cut through a canyon and they had ridden no more than a quarter of a mile on this short cut when they rode up on an open space in the shin-oak and sage grass, and in the center of the space was a pile of ashes. "You see what I see?" Flint asked animatedly.

He leaped down and picked up a branding iron. The curled initials on the end of the iron were J-R. Then suddenly the animation left his face. "Holy crickets," he groaned, "every brandin' crew on the range has one of my irons. Anybody could have dropped it." He tied the iron to his saddle and remounted.

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AN OCCASIONAL jackrabbit loped out of the trail, coyotes howled from the dense valley brush and a frog croaked in the edge of the water in Jackrabbit Creek. Only the yellowish tint where the sun had disappeared prevented darkness here in the creek valley. A distant pistol shot broke the night symphony.

Flint approached the twin oaks with a vague feeling of apprehension. Jesus had seemed as friendly as a pup since Flint had taken care of him, but you could not always tell about these vaqueros. As he approached the two large oaks, rearing their broad tops above the mesquite jungle, Flint moved his hands to his Colts.

He rode to the edge of the little clearing under the trees and reined up. He sat there for a moment and peered into the darkness. "Jesus!" he called in a low voice. He inched his mount closer to the trees.

He saw Jesus Gonzales then. He was sprawled on the ground, in a lifeless slump. Flint leaped down and felt his pulse. The body was still warm. An ugly hole in his forehead was ringed with blood.

"The dirty skunks!" Flint cursed. "Jesus Gonzales never harmed anybody."

He mounted and sat there in the saddle for a long time, his heart heavy. All Jesus was trying to do was to help a man in trouble, and somebody had bushwhacked him for his good intentions. Flint now wished briefly that he had pulled tail that afternoon when they told him. Jesus Gonzales would be alive if he had.

He reined toward home. He would have

to tell Missouri Lunsford, Jesus' employer, and the sheriff, then arrange for a decent burial.

He had reached within half a mile of his cabin when the pounding of hoofs behind him, down the trail, drew him to a halt. He sat his horse there in the trail, his right hand on the butt of one of his .45's, and waited. The moon was a few minutes high now, and soon he saw the form of a horse and rider pounding around a sharp bend in the trail, dashing in and out of deep shadows.

When horse and rider reached within twenty yards of him, his heart leaped. His hand fell from his gun and he sat there in utter surprise as the rider pulled the mount to a sliding stop.

"Irene!" Flint exclaimed. "What in the world—"

"The posse!" she exclaimed. "They're on the way to hang you! You haven't a minute to lose. Ride to the river, to Mexico—anywhere—before it's too late!"

"But, I—"

"Get going, while you can. The men are stirred up. They say they gave you a chance to take your stock and get out of the country and you refused. Now, they're taking things into their own hands!"

Flint refused to be excited. "Then you don't think I ran my brand on yore dad's calves? That's the main thing."

"I didn't say I didn't believe it! It's just that—I won't sit idly at home and wait for a man hanged without a trial. Now will you go?"

Flint nudged his black over against her excited roan. Suddenly he reached over and kissed her. "Now I'll be goin'," he laughed,

A resounding slap on his cheek wiped the mirth from his face, and a puzzled flush crept up his neck as he rode away.

Chapter III

LYNCH LAW

THE posse made no secret of its arrival. Flint had been home nearly an hour, had told Cactus Jackson about what Irene had said and told Cactus he had better ride down the valley till the trouble blew over. Flint knew Cactus wouldn't, and a sense of security ran through him—security in knowing that he had at least one real friend among the many ranchers and cowhands who had called themselves his friends until something had clouded his name.

"We'll barricade ourselves here and shoot the guts outer them polecats!" old Cactus stormed.

"We've got to avoid bloodshed—if possible," Flint Newsome reasoned with the old man. "They have a right to their suspicions. I admit it looks pretty bad—my brand on so many calves that don't belong to me. When ranchers see brands run on the wrong cattle—well, it's just natural they see red. But I think there's something more behind this mob than just my refusal to pull stakes and leave on a moment's notice. Maybe—"

The posse was out front now, and it was making its presence known in no uncertain terms. "Surround the shack!" he heard Peter Collins order.

Flint peered through the single front window and saw about a dozen horsemen milling in front, and some spurring their mounts to the ends and rear of the adobe. There were the Judson brothers from down where the Jackrabbit entered into the Nueces, Hank Jones, a little one-man cattleman from over near the Rufus Hawes headquarters, three or four men from down the creek below Flint's spread and Jake Hiram, surrounded by five or six Circle Dot riders. Jake remained in the background; but while Flint watched, he saw Jake ride up to Peter Collins and say something to him.

"Newsome," Collins yelled excitedly and with a tint of hesitation in his voice, "we give yuh a chance to clear out peaceful. Now it's too late. We're comin' after yuh!"

A rumble of distant thunder was heard.

Flint walked calmly out on his little sod-floored porch. "You men have let somebody—I don't know who—pull the wool over yore eyes. Give me a reasonable time and I'll be able to explain those branded calves to you. Somebody did that apurpose. I don't know who, and I don't know why. I ask you for a little time. You—

"Yuh had too much time already!" yelled a Circle Dot rider from the rear of the crowd. "Yuh gonna let 'im talk hisself out of a necktie party?"

The posse muttered angrily. Flint held up his hand for silence, but his gesture was ignored.

"Yuh got any facts to prove what yuh said?" asked Peter Collins hesitantly, as if he might be a little afraid of his own wavering voice.

"No!" shouted one of the ranchers down the valley. "Course not!" echoed a couple of Circle Dot men. "He's jest stallin'. What we waitin' for?" The men in the back of the group surged forward.

Flint Newsome suddenly whipped out his two old Colts. He fired once just over the heads of the men. Then he dashed into the cabin. "We're ridin'!" he snapped to Cactus.

Two riders sat their horses between Flint's and Cactus' mounts back of the adobe. Flint triggered once and the foremost rider tumbled from his saddle and gripped his right shoulder. His mount reared and snorted, bumping into the other horse.

In that brief moment of confusion, Flint and Cactus dashed across the small yard and landed in their saddles. A fusillade of lead clipped leaves from the mesquite as they vanished into the jungle.

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FLINT had noticed with some satisfaction that Missouri Lunsford was not a member of the posse, nor were any of Missouri's riders.

"They'll expect us to ride into the hills," Flint reasoned to Cactus. "So, we'll ride down the valley ahead of 'em. I'd like to have a word with Missouri."

"What we gonna do? Jest hide out? I'm for blastin' the polecats!" old Cactus roared.

Flint laughed oddly. "We'll save that till last. After all, most of those fellers used to be our friends. They've been boogered into this thing by somebody. We'll find out who, then there'll be a time for blastin'."

Missouri Lunsford waddled out on his porch in his long drawers and carried a shotgun in his hands. "Oh, hello Flint, Cactus. What you gents want?" He rubbed his eyes and sat down on the porch steps. "Light."

"Missouri, there was a posse up at my shack awhile ago. I was glad when I saw you wasn't among 'em. Why?" Flint said seriously.

Missouri stroked his long, bearded chin. "Wa'al, it was like this. They asked me to jine up—Peter Collins and a rider from the Circle Dot—but you always carried straight with me up to now and I didn't see no call to get excited 'bout a few calves with yore brand on 'em. Figgered you'd clear it up after awhile. The Circle Dot rider was purty nasty 'bout it."

The old rancher's attitude warmed Flint's heart. "I admit some other people's calves have got my brand on 'em," he said. "It seems that most of the calves are following Circle Dot calves. Somebody wants to get rid of me, Missouri, and I'm after findin' who it is. Then I'll know who's back of this brand-runnin'. You don't have to answer if you don't want to—but have you heard any of the ranchers complainin' about me? You know anybody that's got it in for me?"

Missouri scratched his chin. "How you stand with Major Hawes? I mean, he been kickin' up any rumpus 'bout yore courtin' Irene?"

Flint thought a minute. "Can't say as he has. Been pretty decent. He was friendly enough last night, when I rode over. Can't say the same for Irene."

"Hum! That stumps me," Lunsford grunted. "How 'bout the cowboys and single ranchers? Any of them been makin' moon-eyes at the girl? From what I been hearin', you've had the inside rail over there for a spell. Mebbe somebody got jealous."

Flint laughed and blushed a little. "What cowpoke, or single rancher either for that matter, wouldn't court Irene if he had the chance? Peter Collins used to go up to see her once in awhile, and Sandy Smith down the valley, and Jake Hiram and Loco Robins and— Holy crickets, Missouri, it reads like a directory of the valley!"

And then he remembered that Peter Collins had been a sort of spokesman—even though a little hesitant—for the posse. Peter was a young widower, but he wasn't the sort of man to go to such length to get rid of a rival, Flint convinced himself.

It was getting late now and the thickening clouds flying up from the Gulf blotted out the moon, breaking through a rift only now and then to light up the valley, as Flint and Cactus rode away from Missouri's house.

"What we gonna do now, son? The posse chased us out of house and home, an' I don't hanker after sleepin' in the open, with that storm abrewin'," complained old Cactus. "My rheumatism's got its claws in me plenty already."

Flint shook his head. "Gives a man a curious feelin'," he muttered. "Six years we been livin' here in the valley, peaceful and friendly with our neighbors. Then, overnight, we can't even return to our own shack. Don't take much, sometimes, to turn a bunch of good men into a wolf-pack."

They rode on in silence for a few minutes. Then, "We could ride back home; but likely some of the posse's there waitin'. We could probably get the drop on 'em and clear 'em out—but, doggone it, Cactus, I can't make myself mad at all these men. There's only one or two among 'em that's responsible. We've got to find the guilty ones with as little bloodshed as possible. So, we'll hole up in that trappers' shack up here on the creek till mornin'."

The shack was no more than a couple of miles up the creek, just off the main valley trail, and they had ridden about fifteen minutes when they galloped around a bend and faced seven riders.

Flint recognized the lead rider as a cowboy from the Circle Dot. As soon as the startled cowpoke recognized Flint and Cactus his hand streaked to his sixgun. Flint reined up with his left hand and his right flashed downward. It came up with a flaming .45 in it.

The cowboy fired a fraction of a second ahead of Flint, but the sudden stop of Flint's mount sent the cowboy's lead wild. Flint's first bullet knocked the Circle Dot rider's hat into the brush. His second brought a yell from the cowboy, whose hand flashed to a crimson spot across the top of his right shoulder.

"Hit the brush!" Flint yelled to Cactus. "Take the left!"

At the same instant, he touched spurs to his spirited black and the animal leaped to the thicket on the right. Three or four shots followed him. One bullet tore a hole through his jacket sleeve.

The posse's horses were a milling, snorting mass there in the narrow trail. Guns roared. Bullets sped wild, snapping limbs above and around Flint, who now was out of sight in the thick mesquite.

He fired two parting shots in the direction of the group, deliberately pointing above their heads. His black hit a narrow arroyo and Flint followed the draw into the safety of the concealing jungle.

Fifty yards farther and he pulled to a stop. The posse still was milling out there in the trail. "Hell!" he heard Sandy Smith growl. "If yuh want 'im, go get 'im. I ain't lost nothin' out there in that brush. I'm ridin' home." The men argued awhile, and then they rode on further down the trail.

A hundred yards farther and Flint cut back into the trail. He whistled quietly and soon Cactus spurred his horse back into the trail.

"Dad bust it!" the old man grumbled. "Why didn't ye plug 'em good. An' ye see what they done to me? Ignored me, that's what they done. Nary a one shot at me!" He spat in disgust. "If anybody's in this thing, I am. I'm guilty of whatever it is—same as ye!"

Flint laughed, slapped the old man on the back as their ponies trotted on toward the trappers' shack. "Better be glad they don't want you. They say a hemp rope scratches yore neck pretty awful."

Chapter IV

CURTAINS FOR THE MAJOR

THE run-down old shack furnished scant shelter against the sheets of rain that whipped through the wide cracks on the wings of a heightening gale.

Flint got up before daylight with water splattering in his face. He pulled a mackinaw over Cactus and stopped the cracks as best he could with rags he found around the shack. As daylight neared, even old Cactus was aroused by the noise of the storm.

"Holy crickets!" Flint moaned. "It's that Gulf hurricane, sure as shootin'. How the devil can we stay holed up here, when there's so much to do?"

He got up, went outside and brought the horses to the north side of the shack, where they would be partially protected from the stinging rain. He got kindling from behind the old cast-iron stove and started a fire, shivering involuntarily as the cold rain misted through on him.

A sudden sweep of the wind moved the shack on its scant foundation and Cactus and Flint looked at each other. Gusts were pounding more often now, and more violently. As they watched the waves of rain sheets flow past the glassless window in the front of the shack, a big water-oak crashed ignobly to the ground, but so furious was the wind that the sound of the fall was only a muffled roar.

"Center of the hurricane can't be very far away," Flint muttered. "It's to the east, too. You can tell by the way the wind's blowin'. Hope the center misses the ranch-houses. Otherwise—" He made a motion with his hands.

It was well past daylight now, but the flying rain and the dense clouds cast a pall of semi-darkness over the hemmed in creek valley. A plank flew off the roof of the shack, nails screaming in the rising crescendo of the wind. Water poured to the dirt floor and soon fragments were floating around inside.

The storm mounted in its fury for another thirty or forty minutes, then it gradually abated till an ominous calm settled over the valley.

"We better be on our way—if our horses are still out there," Flint commented. The roar of the raging creek now nearly drowned his voice.

The door flew open. Old Sanchez stomped in, shaking water from his drenched clothes and slapping his hands to bring warmth to them. He stepped back in surprise when he saw Flint and Cactus. Sanchez trapped in winter, using the shack for headquarters, and lived there at odd times the rest of the year.

"Hurricane!" he exclaimed. "She tear up hell! Peter Collins' house gone. Your shack, she blow down, too. And the Major Hawes place—poof!" He made a motion with his arms.

Flint leaped to his feet. "The major's place? What happened to it? Anybody—hurt?"

"The major," Sanchez said without emotion, "He in bad shape. One of the cowboys killed. Señorita Irene—I do not know."

Flint's face paled, even beyond the paleness brought by the chill wind. He lifted his flat-topped black sombrero and ran his hand aimlessly through his bristling red hair. The muscles in his cheeks flexed. Suddenly he said, "Come on, Cactus. Irene may be in trouble."

Straddling leather, Flint felt better. It was four miles, across the hills, to Circle Dot headquarters and he pressed his black for all it could give through the rough country.

Cactus followed, complaining most of the way. "I'm for havin' it out with them hangnoose hombres," he said, "but I ain't for ridin' up and jest givin' ourselves into their hands. Might know it'd be a woman to lead ye into a trap!"

By the time they reached within a mile of the Circle Dot headquarters, upturned trees and brush bent with the wind told mutely of the terror of the storm. Nearer they rode to the Circle Dot place, more wreckage they saw, indicating that they were approaching the center of the hurricane's path in that section.

They topped a hill and looked down upon what had been the beautiful home of Rufus Hawes. Flint drew his breath in fear.

For half a mile, wreckage from the ranch houses stretched along the north-south path of the hurricane. Most of the out-buildings were either entirely missing or were razed to their foundations. The big Circle Dot ranchhouse itself was only a gaunt skeleton. There was no roof at all, two sides of the main house were gone, and debris cluttered the entire landscape.

Flint touched spurs to his mount, ignoring the men gathered around the site of the wrecked house. Cactus followed in quizzical silence.

Flint leaped to the ground, pushed his way through a crowd of a dozen or more men and women. They stood back and allowed him to pass, some even muttering a good morning. Apparently, in their shocked silence, the events of the past two days had been submerged under the wreckage of the storm.

"Where's the major? Where's Miss Irene!" Flint demanded of a Circle Dot cowboy. He pointed to the rear wall of the wreckage.

Flint noticed now that a part of the old roof had been skewed against the inside of one of the two walls left standing, forming a make-shift shelter.

When Flint shoved his way to the open side of the shelter, he saw [illegible] standing

beside a pallet on the floor. She was stooping over a form, and Flint saw tears in her eyes and his heart ached for her. Jake Hiram tried to comfort her with a clumsy, hairy arm around her shoulders. Old Doctor Skinner sat beside the pallet.

Flint removed his hat, silently drew closer in his awkwardness and saw the form on the pallet was Major Rufus Hawes. Even from this distance, he could hear the old rancher's breath coming in rasps.

"Flint—Flint Newsome!" The old man barely whispered the name. "I—want Flint Newsome." Flint could tell from the way he kept repeating his name that he had been doing it for sometime.

"He's on the dodge, the rustlin' coyote!" Jake Hiram soothed the old man. "He won't give you no more bother."

"No," Rufus Hawes whispered, "I want him brought here. I want—"

"Here I am, Major," Flint said quietly, moving up to the side of the pallet.

Jake Hiram sprang back, startled, at the sound of Flint's voice. His hands moved toward his guns.

"Good mornin', Miss Irene," Flint said humbly. "I'm terribly sorry. I wouldn't do that—here, Jake," he said quietly to the Circle Dot foreman, without making any play for his own guns. "It's hardly the place."

Flint thought he saw a faint smile through tears as Irene looked at him, then turned her eyes back to her father. He stooped beside the old man. "I'm here, Major," he said quietly.

Rufus Hawes strained his faded blue eyes with difficulty toward the sound of Flint's voice. He blinked feebly, then he groaned. With a visible effort he seemed to rally.

"Thank God you got here—in time," he groaned. "They said you were on the dodge. I—didn't believe it. Flint—"

Doctor Skinner put his hand on the old man's head. "I wouldn't talk any more right now, Major," he reasoned. To Flint, he made a sign, and he and Flint withdrew to the entrance.

"Back's broken," the doctor said simply. "Wall fell and crushed him in bed. It's only a matter of hours—and he seems to know it. Better let him rest."

WHEN DEAD MEN BLAZED THE WAY!

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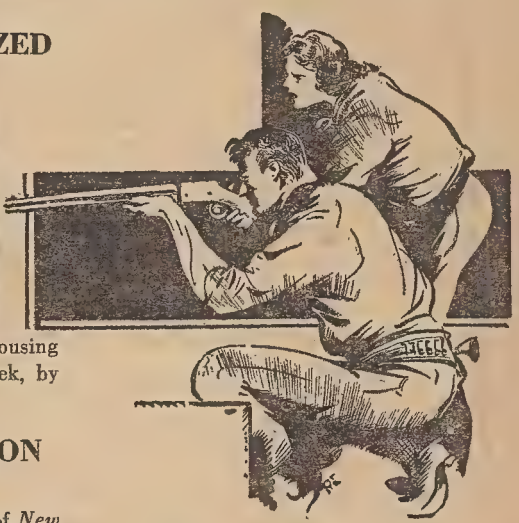

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Flint nodded and stepped outside the makeshift room of death.

But even as he stepped outside, he could hear the feeble rasps of the old rancher calling his name; he heard Irene's brave voice trying to comfort him and his heart bled for her. Then Doctor Skinner stepped to the entrance. "Come on back, Flint. He won't rest till he talks to you. Got something on his mind he considers pretty important, evidently."

Flint squatted beside the pallet. "Here I am, Major," he said softly. He felt a tear roll down his cheek.

"Flint Newsome," the major said, fighting for his breath and the words he wanted. "A great wrong has been done you. I'm —afraid I'm largely responsible. Me—and my selfish cowardice." He coughed and tensed his body.

"You see, you wanted to buy up the range. In a matter of time, you'd be fencing off your land. Other ranchers, knowing you are smart and forward-looking, would have followed suit. It—would have meant the eventual break-up of the great free Nueces range. I was—" he choked. Flint glanced up and caught a glimpse of Irene, leaning over, dry-eyed, listening to her father's every strained word. There was a queer expression on Jake Hiram's face, Flint vaguely noticed.

"I was a stubborn old fool and a moral coward," Rufus Hawes went on, his voice growing weaker.

"So," he winced and faltered a long time, "my mind was fertile ground for a scheme that was put up to me. Oh, I wouldn't have done what I did for that alone—not for a king's ransom, but there are things that a man prizes more than money.

"It goes back, away back, Flint." The dying man's eyes glittered now with a new feeling and a new determination. That fear of looking into the past seemed suddenly to have left them.

"Fifteen years ago—or maybe it was sixteen—it happened in New Orleans. A poker game." He closed his eyes a moment, and when they opened again, mist circled them. "The men were all strangers to me, except one. There was a ruckus over a poker pot. Somebody pulled a gun. I got excited. I completely lost my head. I pulled my gun and fired without exactly knowing it. I killed a man—shot him in the back; and he didn't even wear a gun!" He faltered a long time and emotion shook his pain-racked body.

"I got out of there. Only one man knew my name. That man worked for me, and he forever after held my cowardly secret over my head. Oh, many things I've done that other people couldn't understand—because that man made me do them, by threatening to expose me as the Texan who shot an unarmed man in the back, and threatening to notify Louisiana officers.

"And so when this man conjured up the harm you were doing by homesteading and leading the way to the break-up of the open range, I listened—like a coward. He wanted you out of the way, for another reason—because of Irene. He told me to offer five dollars a head for all the calves my boys branded with your J-R iron. Said he'd expose me if I didn't.

"So I made a deal—with Jake Hiram!"

A noise like the roar of a mad bull rolled from Jake's throat. He flung Irene Hawes aside. His gun flew from its holster and a crash of fire turned the little makeshift room into a bedlam.

When the smoke cleared so that Flint could see, Rufus Hawes lay still and silent, a crimson circle in his forehead, a faint smile on his lips. Flint recovered from the shock in time to see Jake Hiram streaking for a Circle Dot horse. Two other Circle Dot riders were at his heels.

"Hold it, Jake!" Flint yelled. The call went unheeded. Flint fired twice, just above the foreman's head. Jake suddenly swung around and fired. A bullet seared through Flint's left shoulder, knocking him to one knee.

Flint fired from that position. The bullet caught Jake as his left foot was touching the stirrup. The big foreman yelled and tumbled backward. When he tried frantically to rise, his left leg failed him.

The two Circle Dot riders now began pumping lead in Flint's direction. Flint returned the fire, and while he was frantically playing for position, he heard gunfire from the side of the wall. He looked around and saw old Cactus, pouring lead into the riders.

Before Flint could fire again, one of the two riders caught his chest and tumbled forward. The other suddenly dropped his guns and raised his hands.

"Take 'im over, Cactus!" Flint yelled. With both his guns ready, he sprang toward Jake Hiram. The foreman cowered behind a pile of debris, lifted his gun half up to a shooting position, then suddenly dropped it.

"Don't shoot me, Newsome! Don't kill me. I'll come on, peaceful," he whined.

"You damn' swine!" Flint said between gritted teeth. "All right, throw out them guns—both of 'em!" Jake followed, even before the instructions were completed. He pulled himself to his feet and with one hand squeezing his left leg, he hobbled toward Flint.

"I know when I'm licked," he muttered.

Flint stepped to his side and caught his arm, to assist him back to the house. Suddenly Jake's right hand flashed downward. His fingers found the butt of Flint's left sixgun. His finger found the trigger and pressed it, yanking the butt of the gun outward at the same instant.

A searing flame shot through Flint's leg. He slumped to the ground. Jake leaped backward, the gun out of the holster. It barked once.

Flint saw the move and put every ounce of his strength into movement. He rolled to one side and the bullet knocked dirt in his ear.

As he rolled over, his right hand streaked to his other gun. He pointed his holster upward and pulled the trigger.

Jake Hiram's hands raised in an arch, his fingers flexed and pointed down. The gun slid from his hand and he crumpled to the dirt like a thawed dishrag. A gurgle of blood oozed from his mouth and he did not move any more.

Flint moved over to the Circle Dot rider, still covered by old Cactus. The ranchers —men and women—had gathered around, had watched the whole tableau in stunned silence. Two of the women tried to comfort Irene Hawes.

"The major wasn't allowed to finish his story," Flint said, his voice the coldness of icicles on a windowpane. "You better finish it—pronto!"

One look at Flint's pale, grim face loosened the cowboy's tongue.

"Ain't much more. Jake ordered me—and Phate. The idea was to run yuh're brand on some of the major's calves—and on a few others—some of Peter Collins' for one—and rile the ranchers up ag'inst yuh, so's they'd chase yuh off the range. But I swear, Jake made me and Phate help him —and raise the mob to string yuh up, too."

Flint looked at the cowboy a long time, and his frigid contempt turned to a look of pity. He was about to say something to the scared cowboy, but he felt a gentle tug at his sleeve and he turned.

"If you can forgive a foolish, thoughtless girl, I—" It was Irene Hawes and her eyes were red but not wet any longer.

"Shh!" Flint whispered. "Just stand there a minute and let me look at you!"

Some of the ranchers came forward humbly and asked Flint to overlook their part in the posse, and others withdrew silently, ashamed to say anything. But the expression in every face was the same, and it brought Flint happiness.

"One more thing," he said to the remorseful Circle Dot rider. "Who killed Jesus Gonzales?"

"Jake!" the cowboy almost screamed. "The major raised hell with him about it, too. But Jake just laughed."

Flint looked at the rider for a long time. "For yore part in this thing, you take up a collection for Jesus' wife and kids—and see you start it off with twenty dollars of yore own!"

"Yes, sir," the cowboy muttered.

Flint put his arm around Irene. "Try to forget, honey. We've got work to do. Suppose we rebuild—together?"

She smiled wonderfully and rested her head in the crook of his shoulder. Old Cactus Jackson spat: "I knowed it!"

THE END

BUNKHOUSE JARGON

By NEVADA DICK

Part XIV of the Western Fan's Pocket Dictionary

In compiling "Bunkhouse Jargon," the writer has endeavored to list the most common phrases and terms used by those hardy pioneers who migrated and established homes in that vast domain which was known as the American Frontier. Some of the phraseology is now obsolete, but much of it is still used in many parts of the West, principally in the cattleland.

In defining these terms of a past era, the writer in many cases has set down the explanation as given by old-timers, ignoring the rules of the grammarian.

NEVADA DICK

LATCH-STRING ALWAYS OUT—Western parlance, meaning one is always welcome, or the door is never locked against them.

LATIGO—A long leather strap used in cinching up a stock saddle. The strap after being passed successively two or three times through both the cinch ring and the corresponding tree ring, is fastened below the latter in a knot similar to that used in forming the knot on a four-in-hand neck-tie. This knot is on the nigh side, the off straps being called "billets" which are set permanently in place.

LAW DOG—Frontier name for a peace officer.

LAW WEST OF THE PECOS—Alludes to the saloon operated by one Roy Bean, who in 1882, located at Vingaroon, now Lantry, Texas, and appointed himself "judge" of the territory, placing a sign reading: "Law West of the Pecos, Justice of the Peace Roy Bean." Here for many years he held his own brand of court, and if the sentence was death—the culprit hung hard!

LAW WRANGLER—Frontier name for a lawyer.

LAY LOW—Act of hiding out.

LAZY BRAND—A letter or figure, lying on its side.

LEAD POISONING—Old timers' term for one suffering from a gunshot wound, was to say he was laid up with a case of lead poisoning.

LEAD SPAN—The head team of a vehicle, drawn by more than one set of horses. In the four horse hitch-up used by the stages, those nags nearest the stage were called the pole team, while the front team was designated the lead span.

LEAD STEER—A steer of proven stamina, which was trained to head a column of cattle on a trail drive. This bovine would head the drive, setting the pace for its followers. This animal after completing the drive would be returned home to lead another drive.

LEAN-TO—An extension to a building, having a single-pitched roof slanting away from the building against which it leans.

LEG—Colloquial meaning: a part of a journey—the first leg of a drive.

LEG-UP—Act of assisting person to mount an animal, by holding the assisted one's left foot in the hand and pushing upward with the right, which was placed under the leg.

LEG-SHEATH—A knife scabbard, concealed on the leg, to which access is obtained through a secret slit placed in the side seam of the wearer's breeches. This method of carrying a concealed weapon originated among the Border outlaws.

LEMON SQUEEZER—The name applied to the first hammerless pistol, which was a short-barreled safety designed by Douglas B. Wesson, and placed upon the market in 1887. One of these "hide out guns" was the favorite weapon of Bat Masterson, perhaps the most famous peace officer of his time.

LEPPIE—A frontier name for an orphan calf.

LET 'ER BUCK—The bronc rider's signal to his assistants, when he's ready for them to release his mount.

LEVIS—The cowboy name for his overalls, made originally by Levi Strauss of San Francisco, California, a pioneer manufacturer of cowboy working garb.

LICK—Cowboy slang for molasses or syrup.

LICK AND A PROMISE—Meaning to do a haphazard chore—a carelessly handled job.

LIE DOGGO—Lie doggo, means to keep quiet, or concealed.

LIGHT—Western word, signifying to get down off your horse or out of a vehicle.

LIGHT RIDERS—Riders who keep themselves perfectly balanced upon a horse, relieving the animal of the burden of carrying their weight. Such riders can travel long distances without galling or unduly tiring a mount.

LIFT—Traveling in the same direction. To assist one in trouble.

LIKE A BUMP ON A LOG—Meaning one who stays indefinitely in one place, or position—immovable.

LIKE A HEN ON A HOT GRIDDLE—Describes a restless or nervous person.

LIKKER—Frontier name for rot-gut whiskey; the name whiskey was seldom mentioned.

LIMB SKINNER—A cowboy of the brush country.

LINE BREEDING—A cattleman's term, meaning the breeding of cattle of the same strain.

LINE CAMP—Outpost cabins built on large ranches to accommodate the men who "ride the line" and whose duty it was to protect the home-range cattle, and to shunt back visiting stock belonging to neighboring ranches.

LINE RIDERS—Cowboys assigned a regular beat, or boundary line of a ranch to look after their employer's stock—as above.

LINSEED CAKE—A cattle food, made from linseed, and fed as a cattle ration.

LIPPISANI—A rare strain of white horse, which originated in Austria, where Spanish mares were bred to Arabian stallions and produced animals having the peculiar tendency of changing their color *three times* during their early life. When foaled, the colts are black, at two years the hair changes to gray, and before the age of six, it has pure white hair.

LITTLE FELLER—In cattlemen's parlance, a small rancher who can only afford to employ one man, and not large enough to run a wagon on round-up, often called a shirt-tail outfit.

LIZARD—A drag sled, made from the fork of a tree, and supported by standards.

LLANO—An open plain or prairie.

LLANO ESTACADO—A ninety-mile stretch of desert lying in western Texas, also known as the Staked Plains.

LOBO—A lone wolf.

LOCATE—Meaning to herd cattle on a new range until they become accustomed to their new surroundings—and cease the desire to stray back to the old range.

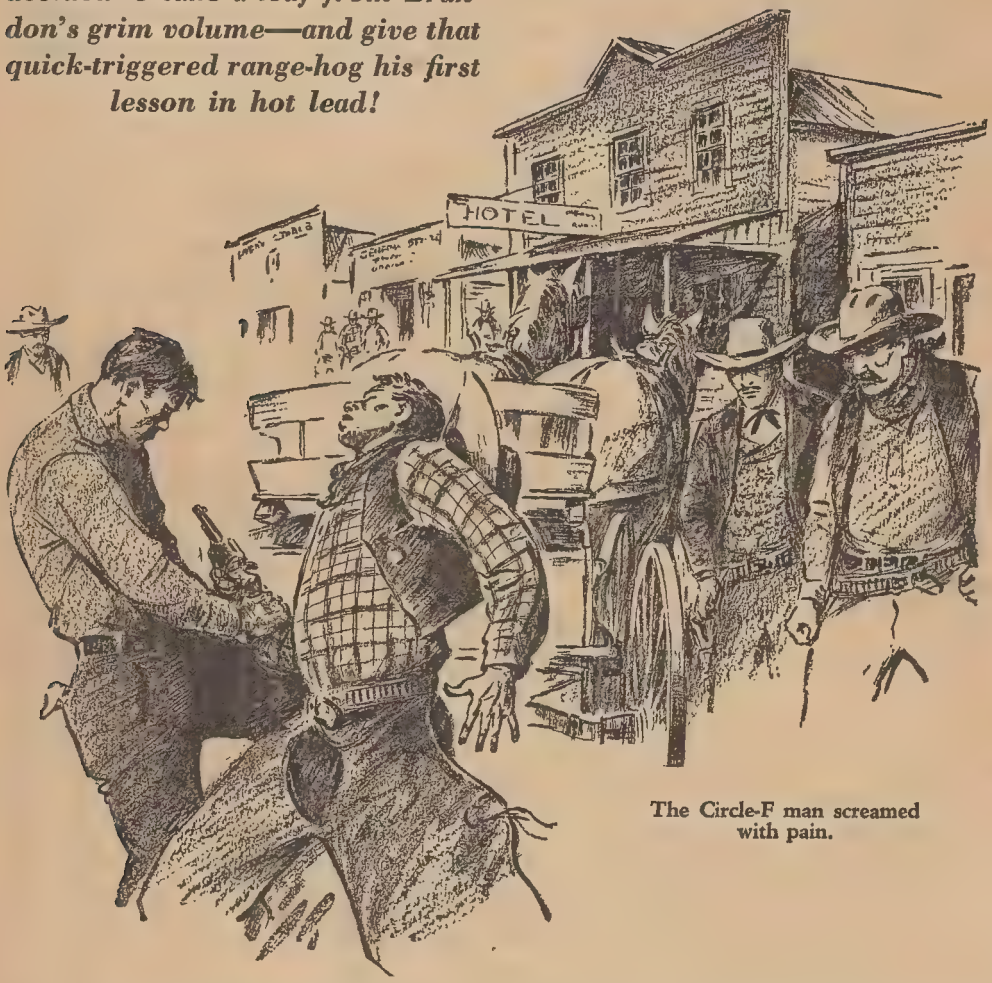
LOCKED SPURS—A pair of spurs, bent or twisted in such a manner as to prevent the rowels from turning, or revolving.

LOCO—Crazy or mad, derives its meaning from the loco plant, a weed which is poisonous to range stock.

Dave Macklin was a peaceful, book-reading nester, but when Brandon fired his house, Dave decided to take a leaf from Brandon's grim volume—and give that quick-triggered range-hog his first lesson in hot lead!

RANGE-HOG'S GUN-LESSON

By JOSEPH L. CHADWICK



The Circle-F man screamed with pain.

DAVE MACKLIN never wore a gun. He minded his own business, coming in to town only to stock up on grub or to pick up one of the books he was always buying through the mail. Folks wondered what was in all those books, but no one ever asked. Flat Rock was strictly a cow-town and Dave, being a nester, was shunned like the plague.

The day he came for the dynamite, Dave still carried no gun. But there was quiet rage burning in his eyes. He strode into Purd Anders' general store, put his big hands flat on the counter, and thrust out his square jaw. He looked all at once like a fighter.

"Purd," he said, "sell me some dynamite."

Surprise washed over the storekeeper's fat face. The several customers gaped, and one—a Circle F rider—left the stock of denim shirts and eased out of the store in a sudden hurry. The big crowded room, smelling of dry goods and groceries, was

tomb-silent. Purd's surprise faded. His small eyes became charged with fear.

"Dave, I can't do that. Sam Forrest warned me. Nobody in Flat Rock dares sell you anything to blast with. Dave, you know that."

"Dynamite," Dave muttered. "You want me to get it myself, Purd?"

The merchant looked at the nester's big hands, at the ugly expression in his eyes. "All right, Dave," he worried. "I'll sell you the stuff, but it'll cause me a heap of trouble." He moved to the back of the store, shaking his bald head.

Dave came from the Emporium with the wooden case on his shoulder. Ht put it into the bed of his buckboard, then crossed the street to the post office. There was mail for him, a small package, and he came out unwrapping it. It was a book. Dave forgot his anger and smiled with anticipated pleasure. He drifted toward his wagon while leafing through the volume. So occupied, he was unaware of the developing trouble until Sam Forrest's harsh and domineering voice called out, "You—Macklin!"

Dave looked up surprised, then seeing the manager of the Circle-F the hardness came back into his face. He closed the book, tucked it under his arm. His glance shifted to the man at Forrest's elbow; he was the rider who had slid out of the Emporium. Dave looked back at Sam Forrest's heavy-jowled face.

"Yes, Sam?"

"You bought dynamite, Macklin?"

"That's right," Dave said, flat-voiced.

"Take it back," Forrest ordered. "Tell Purd to give you your money."

People stopped along the street to watch. Curious faces appeared at doors and windows. Over at the Star Hotel, Sam Forrest's daughter came out onto the porch with a man. A quick alarm came to the girl's face. She spoke to her companion, and he left her and came to stand at Sam Forrest's side. It was a gathering of forces. Dave Macklin felt the pressure of hostility. He stood alone and unarmed, except for a book.

"What's up, Sam?" the newcomer asked.

"This nester bought dynamite," Forrest grunted. "I'm tellin' him to unload it."

Dave stood flat-footed and motionless, realizing that the newcomer was Mark Brandon, the agent for the Western Land & Cattle Company. It was Brandon who had bought out the vast Circle-F outfit, keeping Sam Forrest on as manager. A shrewd-eyed trader, Brandon, a close-to-the-chest gambler in rangeland and cattle—and in other men's lives.

"Dynamite, eh?" said Brandon. "Well, what's he waitin' for?"

"Yeah, Macklin," Forrest muttered. "Get a move on."

"Hold on, Sam," Dave said, careful with his words. "I don't savvy this. We lived neighbors for six months, havin' no trouble. Then a month ago you built a dam that robbed me of my water. My valley is turnin' into a desert wasteland. You're ruinin' me. I don't savvy it."

"You're a squatter, mister," Forrest said. "In cow country."

"I wasn't crowdin' your range." Dave shook his head in bewilderment. "I just can't savvy it."

Sam Forrest shifted his feet uneasily and a sudden confusion showed in his eyes. It was Mark Brandon who answered, authority in his voice.

"I figured you savvied everything, nester," the agent taunted. "Seein' how you do so much book-readin'. But maybe you got too much savvy—of the wrong kind."

"Wisdom has moved mountains," Dave said. "Who are you to mock it?"

Brandon's eyes glinted coldly. He pushed open his black broadcloth coat and fiddled with the thick gold watch chain drooping from pocket to pocket of his flowered vest. A gun showed, hanging low and tied down. Brandon said, "Luke?"

The Circle-F rider stepped forward. "Yeah, Mr. Brandon?" He had broken nose and a scarred cheek. "You want that I should unload that dynamite?"

"Hop to it, Luke," Brandon said.

Dave watched the cowhand step to the wagon. He remembered how for six months he had tried to live in peace with all the Flat Rock countryside. But now he knew. A man could not live his own life; he had to live the life others forced on him. In a sudden rage, he dropped his book and flung himself at Luke. He rocked the rider's head with a blow to the chin.

"Keep away from that wagon!" he warned.

Luke shook his head as though trying

to throw off pain, then, lightning-fast, his hand chopped down and swung up. Dave knocked the gun aside, grabbed Luke's arm and jerked it down across his lifted knee as though he were breaking a stick of kindling. The Circle-F man yelled with pain and dropped his weapon, but then he snaked about and smashed his bent knee into the nester's groin. Dave was bent double with pain, but he came up as Luke dived for his fallen gun. Dave hit him alongside the jaw, felling him. Dave tripped over the man's legs, fell to his knees, and he heard Sam Forrest's daughter cry out in warning from the hotel porch. But she called too late.

Dave tried to duck the blow from behind, but Mark Brandon hit him while he was still on his knees. Brandon's gun barrel crashed against his head, hit him again and again until he was blinded with pain. Brandon beat him down into the dust.

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DAVE finally came to in Doc Marvin's office, and he found that the fussy little medico had treated and bandaged his head while he was unconscious. Dave lay on a high white surgery table; he tried to get down from it, but movement sent a hammer blow of pain through his skull. He groaned and Doc Marvin heard him. The medico came hurrying in with a glass half filled with whiskey.

"Drink this, Dave. It'll pick you up."

The whiskey was raw and burned Dave's throat, but almost at once a warmth spread through his chest and middle. The pain diminished.

"How'd I get here, Doc?"

"The girl brought you," Doc Marvin said. "Her dad and that Brandon hombre left you sprawled in the street, and nobody else dared buck them by helping you. She finally made a couple of gents fetch you in."

"The girl?" Dave muttered. "Sam Forrest's daughter?"

"Yep. She seemed plumb broken up about what happened."

A footfall sounded from the other room. Dave looked up and Ruth Forrest was standing in the doorway. Dave quickly got to his feet, his head reeling. He felt a new warmth, not a liquor glow now but something strange and pleasant, flow through his veins. It was a sensation he always experienced when looking upon this tall and pretty girl. She stirred him. She was dark and vivid, and proud, but now she looked at him, as always on the few occasions they chanced to meet, with a kindly pity.

"You're all right?" she asked.

"Yes'm. I'm obliged to you for havin' me brought here."

"You owe me nothing. I couldn't stand to see you suffer."

The pity was in her voice, and it hurt Dave as much as the blows of Mark Brandon's gun. It cut his pride to the quick. She would have helped a hurt dog as she helped him. He was no more important in her eyes.

"It's no use for you to go on like this," she said. "You know now what can happen to you. The next time it will be worse." She paused, seemed to seek more words, but then from outside her father's voice called angrily, "Ruth, come away from that blamed nester!" And she turned away, her other thoughts unspoken.

Dave went to the window and watched her join her father and Mark Brandon. She walked between the two men. Mark Brandon made a show of offering her his arm. She took it after a moment's hesitation.

Doc Marvin came to the window. He said, "I keep wondering why a man with a big spread like the Circle-F should sell out. That Mark Brandon sure must be a fast talker." He paused and made a clucking noise with his tongue. "Next thing you know, he'll talk that girl into marrying him. Brandon gets what he wants, pronto."

* * *

Dave saw the Circle-F people leave town. He came from the medico's house then, and walked heavily down the street. People stared at him, but kept their distance. He reached his buckboard in front of the general store, and he saw that the case of dynamite was gone. His book was lying in the dust. It was open, and across the pages was the dirty imprint of a boot. Dave stared long at the volume, then he swung about and went into the store.

Purd Anders was alone with his merchan-

dise. "Dave, don't ask me for dynamite again," he begged. "Sam Forrest warned me again. And that Brandon hombre—" The storekeeper dry washed his hands in nervousness. "He can ruin me. His company owns the bank, and the bank holds notes I signed. Dave, be reasonable. Don't ask anybody in Flat Rock for blasting stuff!"

Dave smiled twistedly. "Purd, you got no guts. I'm not askin' for dynamite now. I want some lye. A couple of cases of lye."

Purd gaped. "A couple cases? You makin' that much soap, Dave?"

"Yeah," Dave muttered. "I'm makin' that much soap."

* * *

It was dark when Dave swung his team into the valley. He kept the buckboard rolling right past the little shack that was his home, heading to the valley's north end—to the break in the rock hills where the Circle-F had built the dam. Dave was glad for the darkness. He did not want to look upon the disaster; the dry stream bed and dusty irrigation ditches he had laboriously dug, the ruined acres of alfalfa and the few head of dying cattle.

He stopped the team finally, climbed out and shouldered one of the cases of lye. He climbed up a rocky slope, which a month ago had been a gushing little waterfall, and then at the top he was at the concrete dam breast. It was eight feet high and forty feet wide, small indeed, yet big enough to keep Rush Creek from spilling over from Circle-F land. Dave listened to the wild song of the water; it rushed pell-mell down from the mountains, and it was the life-blood of all the Flat Rock country. Dave lowered the box by the wall and called out, "Charley, it's Dave!" And a rheumatic old mossyhorn emerged from hiding in a stand of rocks.

Charley Bates had been with Dave as a hired hand from the day Dave settled in the valley. A homeless old gent, Charley had just settled down without invitation. He had been in his time cowhand, stage driver, prospector, and a jack of all trades. He came up to Dave now carrying a big miner's drill and a sledge hammer, and he peered eagerly at the big nester.

"You get the dynamite, Dave?" he asked. "I got six, seven holes drilled for it. Plumb hard work, drillin' into that wall. Sam Forrest sure put it up to stay." He chuckled slyly. "But dynamite will blow it!"

"Didn't get the dynamite," Dave said, "but I got something almost as good. Go fetch the other case up from the buckboard."

He broke open the case with the sledge while the oldster was gone. He took out several cans of the lye and found one of the holes Charley had drilled deep into the thick wall. He was busy emptying the lumpy gray-white powder into the hole when Old Charley returned.

"Dave, you gone plumb loco?" the oldster growled. "That stuff is to make soap with!"

"It's for more than that, Charley. We'll put the lye in the holes, add some water, then stop up the openings with heavy wooden plugs. The lye, or caustic soda, will mix with the water and form gases. The gas will have to escape somehow and it will crack the concrete. The dam will give way once it's weakened. The weight of the water behind it will finish the job. By morning, pardner, we should have water!"

"Sounds loco to me, Dave."

"It's not so loco. The Spanish conquistadores used the method in their mining for gold and silver right here in the southwest, four hundred years ago."

Charley Bates shook his head. "Never heard of such minin'."

"Me, I read about it in a book," Dave

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said, and went on with the arduous work.

And shortly before dawn, the dam wall gave way.

Dave and old Charley Bates stood in the sunlight watching life-giving water pouring down the stream bed and trickling into the irrigation ditches.

He would start over, and this time if the Circle-F interfered he would gun-guard his water with a rifle. But he felt reasonably safe. Sam Forrest could not build another such wall until a dry season came and the waters of Rush Creek dropped to a low level. That might not be for months, or for years. Dave clapped old Charley's stooped shoulder, exclaiming, "You see? Book-readin' pays off!"

"Yeah," the oldster said. "But what's Circle-F goin' to do?"

"Nothing. Nothing at all. Forrest will know we licked him."

Then he stiffened, staring across his land. A rider was coming from the direction of the Circle-F. It was a bulky man on a black gelding, and Dave knew it was Sam Forrest. He stood waiting, and the big rancher reined in and set his horse.

"Macklin, I warned you," he said flat-voiced. "You've broken our dam, destroyed Circle-F property, and you're stealin' our water. I'm servin' a warnin' on you. Clear out of the country by sundown."

"And if I don't?"

"Then you'll take what's comin' to you."

"Sam, I never carry a gun any more. You can't turn on an unarmed man."

Forrest lifted his reins. "You heard my warnin'," he muttered.

"Hold on, Sam!" Dave grabbed the horse's bridle. "Sam, I told you I don't savvy this war on me. What do you want?"

"I want nothin' of anybody," Forrest muttered. "I'm only the manager of the Circle-F. I just do as I'm told."

"Then Mark Brandon is behind this?"

Sam Forrest gave Dave a long stare, not saying anything, then he jerked at the bridle reins and rode away. His big shoulders were sagging.

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THE Circle-F struck just after darkness closed down. Some riders using rifles fired on Dave's cattle from the hills. Dave threw leather on a horse and loped across the valley. Three longhorns were down, crippled by bullets, and the remaining dozen were a sorry sight as they milled about.

Dave kept the herd moving, making for a little box canyon among the hills far south, figuring that the stock would be safely hidden there. The drive took him nearly three hours, and when he finally turned back he saw the eerie red glow of fire.

He kicked spurs to his horse and rode wildly back, knowing with a sense of despair that his shack and the few outbuildings were afire. The Circle-F was burning him out.

The flames were roaring wildly when Dave jerked his horse to a stop and swung down. The shack was going up like tinder, and the little barn was already burned out. There was no sign of the night riders, no sign of Charley Bates. Dave called the old man's name but there was no answer. Rounding the blazing house, he stumbled over something. It was Old Charley's bullet-riddled body.

In the gray light of dawn, Dave buried Charley Bates in a lonely grave. He read verse from the Good Book, as though there were other mourners present, then he filled in the grave and built a small rock cairn. Later, the rising sun found him slumped down on a log and staring at the charred and still smoking ruins of his homestead.

"Dave—Mister Macklin."

Ruth Forrest's quiet voice brought Dave part way out of his trance. He rose and eyed her dully, not seeing her prettiness now nor remembering that once he had dreamed of sharing his life with such a girl.

"Dave, I'm sorry," Ruth whispered. "But sympathy does no good. I've brought you something else. Will you take it?"

She was holding out a holstered gun.

"There is a time for peace, and a time for war," she went on. "A man can live alone with his books, or he can fight for the things books tell him to live for. Dave, make your choice."

The dullness faded from Dave's eyes. He could see that she was not pitying him now. Ruth Forrest was begging him to be a man beyond pity. She sat tall and straight in the saddle, still holding out the gun. Dave stepped forward, reaching.

"You'd have me make war on the Circle-F—on your father?"

"No, not on the Circle-F or on my father."

"On Mark Brandon, then?"

"My father left for Tucson yesterday afternoon," the girl said. "He gave no orders for this—" She gestured toward the burned house. "Dave, my father is a beaten man. Years ago, when he was young, he made a mistake. He rode with a wild bunch, and there was a bank robbery. He alone escaped prison or death, and he swore he would never again break the law. And he kept his word—and his secret. But Mark Brandon knew. He was a kid at the time of the bank robbery. He witnessed it, and he saw Sam Forrest's face when his mask slipped."

"So he blackmailed your dad into selling his ranch to that company?"

"Mark Brandon is the Western Land & Cattle Company. He wants to drive you out of this valley, Dave, for it is the gateway to the cattle country beyond."

"Why, the man must want to own the whole world!" Dave muttered.

"Yes," said Ruth Forrest in a flat whisper. "And he wants to own me too."

Dave looked into her eyes and he saw her great fears and her faint hopes, and, too, a promise for him. He took the gun-belt from her hand.

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RUTH FORREST rode into town with him, ignoring his urgings to stay out of the trouble. Dave knew he had ridden into a trap, the minute they hit Flat Rock's main street. The town was too quiet, the dusty street too empty. Only one man was in sight. He lounged against the 'dobe wall of the little post office, directly across from the Star Hotel. Dave's face hardened when he recognized that man as the Circle-F rider Luke.

Beyond the hotel stood the big false-fronted Palace Saloon, and four Circle-F branded horses stood tied to the rail.

Luke put his fingers to his mouth and sounded a sharp whistle. The signal brought four men from the Palace, the Circle-F men, and, a moment later, Mark Brandon from the hotel.

Dave and the girl dismounted before the hotel. Dave said, "Go inside, pronto. There'll be plenty of shootin'." He did not tell her that he felt certain that he would not live through that shooting.

Dave could only move into the middle of the street, where he was a target for a crossfire from Mark Brandon and Luke. The four Circle-F hands came from the saloon door in a bunch. Brandon's dark face wore a smirk.

"Heard you had a little trouble, nester," he taunted. "Was it somethin' books didn't tell you how to handle?" He stepped down from the porch. "You got a choice, Macklin. I'm offerin' a hundred dollars, gold, for your homestead—or a chance to make a play right now."

"I'm makin' a play, Brandon," Dave muttered, and divided his attention between the cattle king and the cowhand Luke. He called, "You ready, Luke?"

Luke said, "Sure, nester," and drew. His gun blasted at once, but Dave Macklin was a difficult target. He had dropped flat to the dust, and Luke's bullet cleared him. Now he came up, moving fast, and his gun was out and firing. Luke hit the ground dead.

The other four Circle-F riders had drawn, but Ruth Forrest stood before them, holding out her arms. Dave heard her voice say, "Boys, you'll have to shoot with me standing here." The four faltered.

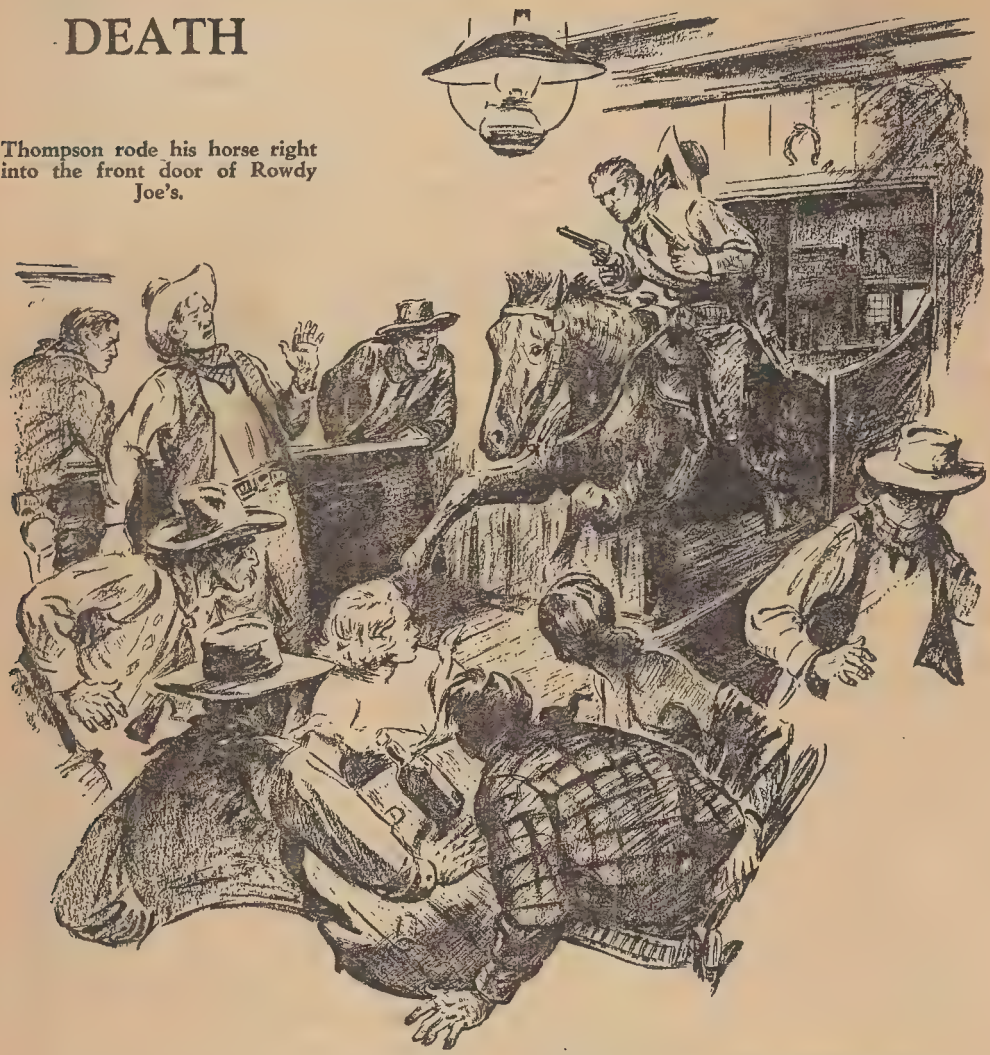
But Mark Brandon fired, and his slug hit like a sledge hammer blow against Dave's left ribs. He fired a second time, this shot ripping at the nester's shirt and searing his chest. Dave saw one brief flash of fear on the man's dark face, an alarm for the trap having misfired, then Dave fired from a crouch as Brandon's third slug went over him. Brandon was dead, then.

A crowd gathered to gape at the two dead men, and at Dave Macklin who was reeling drunkenly, but still holding his gun. But the four Circle F hands made no play now. Ruth Forrest left them and came to help Dave. He saw her worry:

"It's all right. Doc Marvin will patch me up again." He looked at her hard, wondering if she knew. "I did it for you," he told her.

"No, not for me," said Ruth Forrest, her eyes full of meaning. "You did it for the two of us—together."

BEN THOMPSON—GENTLEMAN OF DEATH



Thompson rode his horse right into the front door of Rowdy Joe's.

By HARRY VAN DEMARK

When that famous Colt-artist, Ben Thompson, killed Pegleg Harris in San Antone, he didn't count on a scared, goose-pimpled kid throwing a bullet-loop on destiny's gunman. . . .

BY HIS supreme manipulation of the single-action Colt .45—and it is claimed there was none swifter or deadlier with his weapons save, perhaps, Wild Bill Hickok, and even that is open to dispute—Ben Thompson, ran up a score of twenty-odd notches on his gun-butt.

"And every notch stands for a white man," Thompson boasted. "I have never killed a Mexican or an Indian in my life."

And a gentleman Thompson certainly was—by frontier standards. His early days were spent in Boston and New Orleans, so it was only natural when he appeared on the Texas frontier—better dressed than most, immaculate from the tips of his pol-

ished boots to the twenty-five-dollar black fedora that covered his raven locks, speaking a superior brand of English—that he should be graded well above the average in intelligence.

Most old-timers say that Thompson was pretty bad medicine, asserting that as the thrill of killing human beings grew upon him he went out seeking blood, giving his victims small chance for life.

On the other hand some contemporary historians are apologists for Thompson. They point to his long record in Border courts, and the long string of self-defense verdicts in his favor. They insist that many of the killings charged against him were done in his capacity as an officer of the law.

It is true that at the time Ben Thompson died with his boots on in a San Antonio saloon he was the marshal of police in Austin. But it is just as true that during the same evening he broke up a banquet of the Southwestern Stockman's Association, intent upon slaying a man who was in no way an infractor of the law.

One thing can be said for him without fear of denial. He never killed for gain. Thievery wasn't his aim. As a gambler he had the reputation of running a straight game, which of course only means that he was never caught at crookedness, or, if he was, the other fellow didn't have the nerve to mention it.

Only one of his exploits had a touch of banditry about it. This was the time when he rode into Luling, a cowtown in Caldwell County, and took over the place. In Luling a man they called Rowdy Joe was running one of the toughest dance halls on the frontier. His women were the offscourings of Border hells; his bartenders and game-runners were hard-cases all.

Thompson rode his horse right into the front door of Rowdy Joe's. "I just dropped in to show you skunks who's chief around these parts," he bellowed as he jerked his guns from their holsters. "Anybody here want any part of me?"

Nobody did. There was one possible exception—the lookout on his elevated platform at the end of the gambling room. Maybe the lookout wasn't planning to lift the rifle that lay across his legs. But Thompson evidently thought he was. He flicked his gun muzzle, thumbed the trigger and a bullet plowed through the lookout's arm.

"I'm not figuring on killing anybody tonight," Thompson told them. "I'm in Luling to have a good time. Now, get out, all of you!"

They got, Thompson speeding them on their way with lead that whistled by their ears. The gunman then dismounted, strolled over to the gaming tables and gathered up a sackful of gold pieces. He stopped at the bar to pour himself a slug of Rowdy Joe's whiskey, then went along to have his good time.

Thompson didn't carry a cent of Luling money out of town. He spent it all in the other saloons and dives. The fact that in all his carousing not one of the desperate characters he had chivvied in Rowdy Joe's even tried to put a bullet through him clearly reveals the fear he evoked in the tough denizens of the many frontier honky-tonks.

But supreme in fearlessness as he was, it was not written that Ben Thompson should die in bed. He made the same mistake that many a frontier killer did: he got a cowardly enemy too frightened of him. The events leading up to his violent end dated back to Thompson's killing of Pegleg Harris in Harris' own saloon in San Antonio. Harris was warned that Thompson was looking for him, but he was nevertheless killed in cold blood, without having a chance to even defend his life.

But Thompson got his usual "self-defense" verdict.

Harris had a partner, a young fellow

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named Billy Simms, only nineteen years old. After Pegleg's demise, Billy took over the management of the place. One night he said or did something that aroused Thompson's wrath. The gunman left the place, vowing that he would kill Simms.

Simms, in deathly fear of the killer, sold out his holdings and left town. For over a year he stayed away. Then he received word that his mother was dying in Austin. He resolved to go back even though by now Thompson had gotten himself appointed marshall of police in the Texas capital city.

But Simms was not molested in Austin. "I can't kill a man who is visiting his sick mother," Thompson proclaimed in mock self-righteousness. "But sooner or later he'll go to San Antone. I'll get him there."

IT WAS mid-January and even the weather was threatening. At noon a cold breath came out of the north. By mid-afternoon a real Texas norther was raging.

Because of the storm two cattlemen, whose home ranches were within riding distance of Austin, were late for the cattlemen's meeting. In fact they missed the day session. They were riding through the country a few miles out of town as darkness fell. They'd be in time for the banquet, anyway.

Suddenly through the dusk loomed a sinister figure; a tall chap who lurked beside a clump of trees. Even under the circumstances there was a touch of the dandy about him. He wore a tight-fitting Prince Albert coat, and closer inspection would have revealed a flowered waistcoat underneath. His snugly-fitting trousers were tucked into patent leather boots.

But it wasn't clothes that stopped the ranchers. Two steadily-leveled guns were what made those cattlemen easy to get along with. They had noticed, too, that a black silk handkerchief concealed most of the tall man's face.

"Don't be alarmed, gentlemen," he told them. "This is not a hold-up. I was just wearing the mask until I made sure of your identity."

One .45 slid back into its holster and the man quickly jerked the handkerchief from his face, revealing Ben Thompson.

"I stopped you gentlemen to ask you to do me a favor," said Ben. "I hear Billy Simms will attend your banquet. Will you kindly tell him that Ben Thompson is coming there after him? I wouldn't even kill a snake without giving it warning."

The ranchers agreed to deliver the message and the tall figure faded into the gloom.

It was a different Ben Thompson who showed up at the banquet. There was nothing suave or polished about the killer now. His face was flushed, his eyes blazed, his lips were twisted.

"Come up shooting, Billy Simms, and die like a man!" he shouted.

But he got no action out of Billy. The young man, forewarned, was not there. As for the ranchers, they had no intention of getting in the way of stray lead. Some scrambled out through the doors and windows. Others took refuge under the tables.

When he found his quarry was among the missing, Thompson departed, leaving the banqueters in peace.

In the meantime, Billy Simms had had a busy afternoon. His first warning that Thompson was on his trail had come in a telegram from Austin: "Party who wants to destroy you on train this day bound for San Antonio."

Simms showed the wire to the town marshal, asked for protection. But that worthy said he had no charges pending against Thompson, could do nothing unless the man from Austin broke the law.

Simms then sought out the local judge, asked his advice. Said the judge, "If I were you I'd get me a shotgun loaded with slugs."

The scared young man did just that and with this lethal weapon took his station at the top of the stairs leading into the San Antonio dance hall, gambling room and vaudeville show. He knew Thompson would seek him there.

But as he waited he got a case of jitters, left his station, took a turn around the block, shotgun and all. When he returned he was met on the stairway by a frightened bartender, who imparted the information that Thompson had arrived during his absence accompanied by King Fisher, a notorious character, almost as deadly as Thompson.

But the kid had reached the limit of fright; had become so thoroughly scared that anything was better than living under such a menace. So with shaky steps he

moved into the dance hall. Thompson saw him enter, arose ready for action. Face to face with his enemy the young man's muscles went cold. He stood there, rigid from fear, unable to lift his gun. Sweat matted his face.

Jed Foster, a friend of Simms, saw the situation, made a lunge at Thompson. The latter turned, knocked Foster down, jumped astride him, thrust the muzzle of a .45 into the fallen man's mouth and pulled the trigger. The weapon missed fire.

All this action seemed to loosen the muscles of young Simms. He was afraid to use his shotgun, fearing to kill his friend Foster, so he dropped the heavier weapon and went for his sixgun.

His first shot caught Thompson in the chest. The killer got to his feet, stood there swaying.

Foster also sprang up, swung his sixgun and knocked Thompson to the floor. Then he gave the Austin marshal a taste of his own medicine. He thrust the muzzle of the gun into Thompson's mouth, pulled the trigger twice.

That was the end of Ben Thompson. In all his finery he gasped out his life on the dance hall floor.

But he had company in hell for breakfast. King Fisher was yet to be reckoned with.

Foster, warned by a dozen shouts, turned to defend himself from Fisher. At the same moment Simms started shooting.

Unfortunately for Jed Foster, the boy's fright had again possessed him. His wobbly aim sent bullets zinging all over the room. One piece of his lead caught Foster in the temple, killing him instantly.

But for this unlucky bullet there was another lucky one. It plugged King Fisher squarely between the eyes and the fight was over.

Three qualified *malo hombres*—men who had come through many a desperate battle—lay dead on the dance hall floor. The only active participant in the battle to come through unscathed was young Billy Simms, who never before in his life had pulled down on a man, and who was so frightened by the incident that for years, when telling of the fight, he would break out into sobs.

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An honest cow-country lawyer, Lon Morgan must condemn either his own brother or the youngster whom he wanted for a son-in-law to a howling, blood-hungry hang-mob. . . . Knowing that, whatever his choice, he was sentencing himself to grim and bitter years on an outcast's trail to hell!

Chapter I

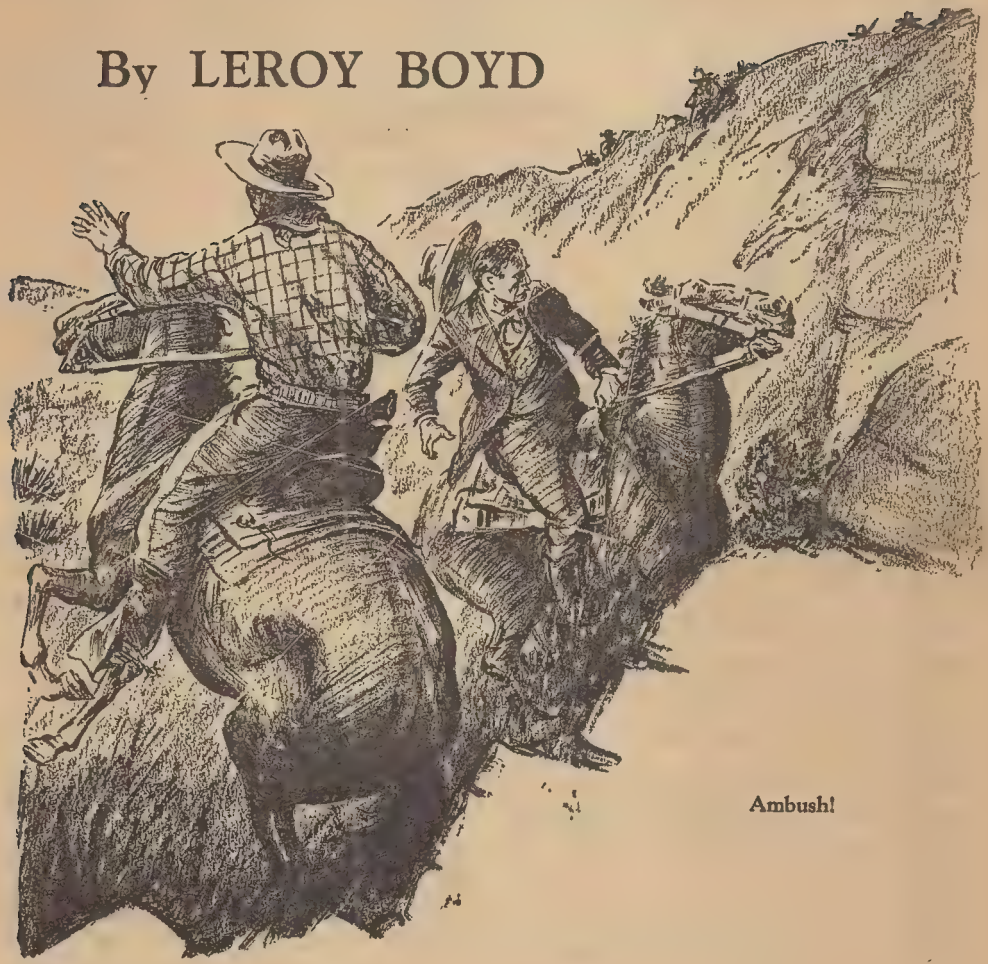
FRIENDS OF THE KILLER

A DOZEN cowmen, their weather-beaten faces flushed with the fire of their passions, crowded after Lon Morgan into his outer office. A larger number in the hallway pushed at their backs to get through the door.

Lon halted and turned to face them. "I'm awful busy, boys," he said as softly as he could in an effort to mollify their

THE OWLHOOT

By LEROY BOYD



Ambush!

Thrilling Manhunt Novelette

anger. "Got to think it over. Let you know tomorrow."

"Tomorrow—like hell!" Ike Parsons, leader of the big ranchers in the county, bit out. "We got to know *now*—right this minute! What are you going to do about that hombre who done for Anse?"

A growl like the rumble of thunder rolling across the sky began among those around Parsons and passed to those milling in the hall outside the lawyer's office.

Lon drew himself up with dignity, and his eyes took on that subtle hardness characteristic of a courtroom prosecutor. "Curt Donovan," he promised, "will have a regular trial."

The mob had quieted a little to hear what he had to say. Lon was a lawyer, district attorney for Mariposa County, and he thought as one. He realized that it would be no hard task to get a conviction from a jury drawn from these men.

Lon cleared his throat with a show of judicial authority. He added: "The law will have to take its course."

A redhead at the back of the crowd loosed a cynical laugh that sounded like the caterwauling of a wildcat. An old fellow with tobacco-stained white chin whiskers, a veteran of the country, snorted and said he thought they ought to take the law in their hands—like in the old days.

A tremulous chill passed through Lon. He could tell something about that shoot-

ing on the Silverstreak trail near Hackberry Springs where Anse Gradle of the Circle-J had met his death. He could tell —if he dared!

"Maybe—" he said, his voice sounding as if it came from a great distance. "Maybe Curt Donovan didn't do it."

A bedlam of noise filled the room, and out of the racket came chin-whisker's high pitched cackle opining that the district attorney ought to have his neck stretched too.

Ike Parsons, however, was in charge here. He advanced belligerently on Lon, his stubbled chin thrust forward and his hand wrapped about the butt of his Colt.

"You're stalling," Ike said stonily. He pulled his sixgun half from the leather. "Just like we thought you'd do—stalling! And you don't need to tell us why!"

The implication whipped across Lon's face like a lash and it stung. At the moment he was unarmed, and he took a step backward before Ike's threat.

"Make you a proposition—if you think Curt ain't guilty," Ike added, with no effort to conceal his sarcasm. "Find us the snake that *did* plug Anse and we'll know Curt didn't do it!"

"Hell—let's get same practice with big mouth here," the red-head yelped irrationally. "Get a rope, somebody. What're we waiting for?"

"Yes—why?"

The words came with sudden sharpness; they drenched the ragged roar of noise like a cloud burst falling on the prairie.

The door between the outer and inner offices had opened; framed there was a young woman, her dark eyes flashing above her pale countenance. In her hand was a leveled gun.

Lon glanced to his side. From his throat came the whispered one word—"Anne!"

Chin-whiskers blinked his surprise. A smirk flashed on the red-head's lips. Ike's mouth slacked open; shut tight like a trap.

"Get out!" Anne said huskily. "All of you!"

Ike stood with his gaze fastened on the gun. Lon could see Anne's hand wavering, and he held his breath until his lungs hurt.

For a few seconds Ike appeared ready to precipitate the tragedy that was suspended over them. Then an ironic grin appeared, and his fingers uncurled from the black walnut stock.

"See you—later," Ike shot at Lon.

He moved backward, and without a word the mob went before him into the hall. Lon followed and closed the door on them, slammed the bolt home.

◇ ◇ ◇

FOR a little while Lon hung on the door knob, listening to the sounds of boot-heels going down the stairs. He waited until he had drawn enough strength to stand up on his legs once more.

Slowly he turned, his face ashen, and peered at his daughter. Finally, he was able to speak. "Anne—how'd you get here?"

"Came to walk home with you for supper—waiting in there. Dad—I heard them."

"That gun?"

"Found it in your desk."

"Good heavens, Anne, it isn't loaded. Wouldn't shoot if it was!"

She lifted the weapon, stared at it dumbly. It dropped from her fingers to the floor.

Lon took her arm and guided her into the other room, sat her down on a chair.

Reaction brought the tears then. She laid her head down on the desk, her shoulders shaking with the force of her sobbing.

Lon let her have her cry out. He got a cigar and lit it, walked over to the window and looked down on the dusty street of the old cowtown.

He began to consider the ramifications of this case of Curt Donovan, whom he would have to charge with the murder of Anse Gradle at the preliminary hearing tomorrow.

For a long time now Lon had had ambitions to go up in his profession and politics. Other men had used the office of district attorney as a stepping stone. Why shouldn't he?

With the feeling in the community against Curt as it was, he'd get a death verdict and with it the reputation of zeal and competence in his public duty.

He'd also have the support of Ike Parsons and the other big cattlemen—if he did of course, as they wanted him to.

If the mob, enraged at his postponement

of the hearing for a day, got out of hand, though, and lynched Curt. . . .

"What did they mean about Curt?" Anne asked.

Lon swung around, walked over and dropped down on his swivel chair behind the desk.

Anne had dried her tears. A puzzled, questioning look had come into her eyes.

Lon glanced at her. Then he lowered his gaze and flicked the ash from his cigar.

"Sheriff Lattimer brought Curt in this afternoon. They say he killed Anse Gradle out there by Hackberry Springs. Anse was on his way home with the payroll for his men. The money's gone."

"What are you going to do?"

"Only one thing I can do, Anne. I'll have to file information against him—charge him with murder."

"Curt didn't kill Anse or anybody else."

"They had a quarrel over a fence there at those springs. Some hard words passed back and forth. It looks bad for the boy."

"You've got to help him, Pa. Resign—can't you—and be his lawyer. He's got to have a good one."

The fierce intensity of her insistence jolted him, hard. He returned his gaze to her. "Like Curt very much?"

"We were going to be married—soon as he got his cabin fixed up, good enough for me—that's the way he put it," she smiled bitterly, "and got a little money saved."

"Didn't know that."

Running throuhg his mind was the constant reminder: If he handled this thing right there was no telling how far he could go with Ike Parson's help.

He added slowly: "You never told me, Anne."

"We wanted to surprise you."

Anne leaned forward, her hands gripping the edge of the desk. "Can't you see, Pa? It's a frame-up—against Curt. And they're making you do their dirty work."

He shook his head in solemn protest. "You know Curt never killed Anse!"

Lon closed his eyes as if he would seek refuge in darkness from the incontestable truth of her words.

For he *knew* Curt was no murderer.

He had seen that killing out there by Hackberry Springs. It had been about midnight—last night—and he, was on his way back from Gallego. A full moon was shining, lighting the land almost as brightly as day.

Hearing loud words on the trail ahead, some instinct had caused him to halt his horse behind a screen of cedar. He'd been no more than thirty yards from Anse and the killer.

Anse's arms were raised, and when the slug hit him in the chest he toppled to the ground as if some unseen hand had knocked him from the saddle.

The killer moved swiftly, getting the money from Anse's pocket. Then he hurried over to his horse that had been left in a thicket by the creek.

For one brief instant the moonlight had fallen on the killer's face beneath the low drawn brim of his hat. There had been but a flash of the man's features, but Lon was certain of his recognition when he saw the killer hurry over for his horse. Lon couldn't tell Ike Parsons or Sheriff Lattimer or even Anne here that Buck, his brother, had killed and robbed Anse. . . .

He'd kept quiet about the letter he'd received from Buck a month ago—burned it so Anne wouldn't find it. Buck who was always getting into trouble and calling on his brother for help had written he was coming to Silverstreak. He wanted to make a friendly visit, and he'd hole up some place out of town where no one would see him. He'd got word to Lon, and Lon could come out and nobody would ever know that the district attorney had a hardcase brother.

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No—Lon couldn't tell. He couldn't save Curt by pointing the finger at Buck.

"You believe in justice—don't you, Pa?"

He looked up as if noticing for the first time that she was there. "Huh?" he mumbled. "Oh, sure—sure. Have to see what we can do for the boy."

Certainly, he believed in justice. When he'd been admitted to the bar he'd taken a solemn oath to uphold the law. There was something, too, about the ethics of his profession.

He tossed down his cigar butt and stood up. "Let's go to supper first, though," he said. "Give me time to figure out something."

Chapter II

LYNCH PARTY

WITH the coming of darkness, an apprehensive tension gripped Silverstreak. Lon felt it when he slipped away from Anne after supper and stole out to saddle his horse.

Mounting, he rode a circuitous route through the back streets of the town to come in behind the jail. He tied his bronc to a post of Sheriff Lattimer's horse corral, and made his way through the vacant lot at the side of the building to the main street, so that he could approach the front entrance from the direction of town.

At the front door he paused, a worried frown creasing his forehead as he listened to the raucous racket coming from the Spread Eagle where Ike Parsons and his crowd were liquoring up.

Even the air seemed to possess electric tension: the threat of a lynching—a lynching of an innocent man!

Lon's hand crept inside his coat to feel of the gun in the shoulder holster he'd put on. A lone cloud drifted across the face of the moon in the east, like an omen of evil, and the dread inside of Lon expanded to greater proportions.

He shook it off with a shrug of his shoulders, and went into the sheriff's office.

Lattimer had his heels on his desk, a foul smelling pipe in his mouth, and he was reading a newspaper. He appeared entirely unconcerned about the violence building up in the town, or he apparently was unaware of it. Lon saw quickly he had taken no extra precautions to protect his prisoner.

Lattimer was honest. But Lon couldn't rid his mind of the fact that the support of Ike Parsons had elected him to his office.

Seeing Lon the sheriff dropped his feet to the floor, took the pipe from his mouth, and asked to know what he could do for him.

"Thought I'd talk with Curt again," Lon said. "Couple points I'd like to clear up before the hearing tomorrow."

"Too bad about the boy," Lattimer said as he pulled out a drawer and got a ring of keys.

Lon caught the unsaid meaning in his voice, and he didn't like it. Just because the boy might possibly have become his son-in-law—he didn't want any sympathy.

He said crisply: "Ever find the pocketbook—or the money?"

"Not yet," Lattimer answered. "Funny thing about that, too. Going out early in the morning, though, for another look through the cabin."

The sheriff led the way back to the cells and opened a barred door. Lon told him he wanted to talk with Curt alone.

Lattimer nodded and said: "When you're ready—call." He went back to his office, leaving the door open so that he could watch the corridor.

Lon stepped into the cell and sat down on the bunk. Curt squatted on his heels, rested his back against the steel partition of the adjoining cell. For several moments they stared at each other. Curt began to roll a cigarette.

Lon's gaze was fascinated by the sardonic twist of the boy's lips. He lowered his eyes to the fingers working at the paper and tobacco. The lad was fighting hard to control himself.

A strange miasma had penetrated the thick walls of the jail. Lon shivered a little, like one shaking at the feel of a cold, wet wind.

When Lon had a grip upon himself again he said: "Anne was asking about you, Curt. Wants me to do something for you."

The boy sent a sharp look at him. His cynical grin became more pronounced, and he drawled: "Yeh?"

"She doesn't think you did it—that is, killed Anse."

" 'Course I didn't. But just try telling

that to Ike Parsons or this damn' stooge of a sheriff."

Lon parried with an interruption.

"If you had an alibi," he suggested. "If you were in town here when Anse was killed and somebody saw you—could swear to it."

Curt shrugged his shoulders. "No can do," he said. "Home last night—except for about an hour when I rode down to the springs to fix the fence around those sands. More than that—the hired man was gone, too. You see?"

He lit his cigarette and sent a thin cloud of smoke towards the ceiling. "No, Lon, you've got me cold. I had a run-in with Anse, over that fence. And because I had the guts to tell Anse where to get off, why I got to—"

A gun roared somewhere up town, the noise of it striking the window of the cell with a cottony sound. Sheriff Lattimer's chair scraped nervously on the floor in his office.

"Ike Parsons and his gang'll be coming pretty soon," Curt said. "But they won't find me crying—and that's more than can be said for a lot of the yellow bellies that'll be bringin' the rope—if they were in my place."

He stood up and stretched, and with the muscles of his stomach drawn tight he drew in a long breath.

"This hired man of yours," Lon murmured, lifting his eyes to watch Curt's face. "Took him on just a few days ago, didn't you? Don't believe I've seen him yet. What does he look like?"

"Tex Calhoun? . . . Just a saddle tramp. Tall and rawboned—limps in his left leg—"

"Has a scar on the right side of his chin?"

"Never noticed." Curt threw his butt away and began to fashion another cigarette. "Why?"

Lon dodged that.

A picture of his older brother flashed in his mind.

Buck had taken a bullet in his leg in a brawl down San Antone way and had limped ever since. And Buck had written he was coming and would stop some place out of town!

The name—Tex Calhoun—didn't mean anything. Buck had a dozen fictitious names he used. . . .

LON got slowly to his feet. He gripped Curt's arm.

A new and strange quality had come into his voice when he said: "Keep your chin up, son. There's always a way out!"

As if afraid he'd say more, he hurried out into the corridor. Sheriff Lattimer saw him emerge from the cell and came back to lock the door again.

Lon had taken a few steps towards the office. He turned when the sheriff passed him, and his hand slid inside his coat.

Lattimer selected a key on the ring, stooped to insert it in the lock. Lon's arm flashed upward; he crashed the barrel of the sixgun on the back of the sheriff's head.

Lattimer never knew what hit him. His body just collapsed, like a deflated balloon. The keys tinkled with a metallic sound when they hit the floor.

For a moment Lon stared as one in a daze at the grotesque shape the sheriff's body had taken, and into his head rushed all the black despair of one who believes he has committed the unpardonable sin.

He had no regrets, though. He was saving an innocent kid.

He'd done this for the sake of Anne, too. He'd help the boy get away, and later when things quieted down she could go to him.

Lon was sweating; he swabbed the wet from his forehead and slipped the gun back in its holster under his coat.

He looked towards Curt. The boy was standing in the door of the cell, and in the murky gloom of the corridor his face was deathly white. Incongruously, Lon noted Curt's mouth had fallen open.

"Why—why—" Curt mumbled.

"Come on—get a move on," Lon snapped. "Before they come!"

At that moment, however, someone up front sent a yell through the building. "Lattimer—you here?"

A boot tread on the floor, and the jingle of spurs warned Lon someone had come into the office.

A heavy, ominous silence filled the corridor. Lon felt it pressing at the base of his neck like a Spanish garrote.

"Inside," Lon whispered hoarsely. "Keep him quiet. Better pull the door to."

Lon moved quickly before the stranger

should decide to come back to the cells. He straightened his coat, got a firm grasp on his nerves, and hurried to the office.

He came to an abrupt halt. He said: "Oh—you?"

Ike Parsons was standing by the desk.

Lon closed the door behind him, and the click of its latch sounded loud in his ears.

Ike heard it, too, and gave Lon a sharp look. He asked suspiciously "Where's Lattimer?"

"Gone out for a bit. You wanted something?"

"Nothing important." Ike's eyes narrowed. "Know where he went?"

"Didn't say. Might find him up town."

Ike squeezed his lower lip with his teeth, like one puzzled by an idea. "Curt still back there?"

"Where'd you think he'd be?" Lon paused a second to fill his lungs with air. "Want to see him?"

"Ain't necessary. You going to be here long?"

"I'll wait till Lattimer comes back."

Ike nodded with the quick gesture of one who has suddenly made up his mind. "I'll tell 'im you're waiting," he said.

He swung on his heel and left the building. Lon listened to the receding clump of his boots on the board sidewalk as he made his way back to town and the Spread Eagle.

Weakness washed over Lon, and he leaned against the wall to hold himself up. His heart was pounding wildly in an effort to pump new courage into his veins.

At the back of his mind had been the thought he had to play for time in order to work out this matter. It was all to be by legal procedure, though. He'd have Curt him him over the head—tie both him and Lattimer and lock them in the cell. That way it would appear he'd had nothing to do with the jailbreak. He would have bluffed it out—when the mob came in the next few minutes.

But now—

Ike Parsons wasn't dumb; he could put two and two together!

The door leading to the corridor opened a crack. A bellow of roars and curses flowed into the office.

"Is he gone, Lon?"

Lon picked Curt's voice out of the yelling. He pulled himself up and turned to the boy peering at him through the opening.

"We'll have to hurry, son," Lon mumbled. "That was Parsons. He's gone back for the crowd."

Curt rushed into the room, moved with catlike steps to the desk and went through the drawers. He got his gun. "Now if they want a fight—"

"Can't fight them—not here. What's that hollering?"

"Some drunk waking up—wants out, too."

"Have the whole damn' town down here."

Curt buckled on his belt, inspected his gun to see that it was loaded. He stalked to the outside door for a glance up the street. He turned his head to Lon. "Ready?" he asked.

They slipped out the door and around the building to the horse lot at the rear. Curt saddled and bridled his bronc.

Lon untied his horse. His hand was on the horn and his foot in the stirrup, but before he swung up he cocked an ear towards town.

The riot of sound emanating from the Spread Eagle took on a deeper tone, like the angry bass of the horns breaking on the strings of a symphony.

His thoughts were jarred by a question from Curt: "What about Anne?"

"They won't bother her," Lon answered crisply. "Later—we'll send for her."

"I don't like to go off and leave her alone."

"Be all right." Lon mounted his horse, tightened up on the reins. "Come on—we don't have much time."

They rode south, and a mile out of town swung on a wide circle to the north in the direction of Curt's ranch up on the Yampa.

Chapter III

UNCLE BUCK PLAYS A HAND

IF THEY could get to the wild, mountainous country above Grant's Pass they could hide out for as long as necessary.

When the mob had had time to cool off he could return and start the legal machinery to clear Curt.

But right now if they were going on the dodge they'd need supplies.

Curt said they could get food and

blankets at his cabin. "Probably burn the place down anyway," he said, his smile visible in the full moonlight. "Might as well save what I can."

So it was that at two o'clock in the morning they rode up to the front of the cabin and dismounted in the dooryard. They went inside and Curt struck a match and lit a lamp.

"I'll rustle some grub," Curt told Lon. "You get the blankets out of the bedroom there." Curt hurried back to the kitchen.

Lon started for the bedroom. A half dozen feet from the door, though, he stopped suddenly and his muscles tensed.

A man had appeared out of the darkness of the room, had halted in the doorway, a leer upon his face and a gun in his hand.

Lon recognized his owlhoot brother!

Buck's name gurgled from Lon's tightening throat. Then all the bitterness within him turned to iron; his jaw hardened like granite. "Come back—huh?"

Buck turned the query aside. He jerked his head towards the kitchen. "Friend of yours?"

Anger exploded inside Lon, the madness that had been building up ever since he'd faced the mob in his office a few hours ago.

"Hope you're satisfied—tearing down all I've built up," he snarled. "You're doing a good job, Buck!"

Buck grinned slyly, the scar on the side of his chin pulling the muscles into a small knot. With an easy sinuous motion he sheathed his gun. "Don't get excited, little brother," he said. "You know I wouldn't hurt you—always ready to do anything in the world for you. Just wanted to see how you're getting along—"

Buck's eyes darted sideways. Lon followed his gaze.

Curt had heard their talk, had come back from the kitchen.

Curt froze at the sight of Buck. His right elbow crooked out from his body, his fingers above the butt of his gun. "Know this hombre, Lon?" he growled. "How'd he get in here?"

"*You* ought to know him, Curt—your hired man. Happens to be my brother, too, Buck Morgan, though—"

"Hired man—hell! I never saw him before in my life!"

Curt's words seared into Lon's brain like a red hot branding iron. It hadn't been Buck he'd seen bending over Anse Gradle out there on the trail after all!

Buck chuckled with cold humor. "Got in 'bout an hour ago. Waiting for somebody to show up."

Curt's body relaxed a little. Yet the air remained charged with the ozone of electric tension.

Buck sensed the feeling. "What's the matter with you birds?" he rasped. "What's going on here?"

Curt shook his head at Lon, but Lon paid no attention to him. Words rolled up from within him like bile into a man's mouth. From his lips poured a flood of disjointed sentences that were filled with the virulence of his temper.

As comprehension dawned on Buck a mocking grimace appeared slowly on his face. He rolled a cigarette and lit it, the match etching into sharp relief the sardonic lines of his features. The sight of them shoved Lon close to the verge of frenzy.

Suddenly Buck stopped him with a clipped command. He stepped across the room with a fluid motion and blew out the lamp, dropped his cigarette to the floor and crushed it with his foot. He whipped his gun out and moved to the window where he could see the moon swept yard.

Into the cabin came a silence. In the quiet Lon caught the sound of a horse coming up the trail from the direction of town, its hoofs pounding rapidly on the hard ground.

Lon heard Curt rush into the bedroom for his Winchester. He drew his own gun from beneath his coat and was conscious of a relief that that which he had dreaded had come at last.

The rider pulled up before the cabin. A voice hammered at the door.

"Curt—Curt, you here?"

It wasn't the mob. It was Anne!

Lon flung open the door, and Curt crowded out behind him.

Anne swung to the ground and rushed to meet them. "I was afraid I wouldn't get here in time," she cried.

Curt started to say something, but Lon interrupted him.

"What the devil you mean, Anne—coming out here?" he barked.

She turned on him fiercely. "You've got to get out of here—both of you. Ike Par-

sons and his gang'll be here any minute!"

She rubbed away the tears that had started. She added: "When you sneaked out of the house I went down town to see what had become of you. . . . They found Lattimer in the jail—when the mob went there for blood. Curt was gone—and you, too, Pa. Heard them talking; somebody said Curt would be sure to come here first. . . . Sheriff Lattimer was swearing in a lot of deputies."

Lon felt another loop tightening about his shoulders; it was squeezing the breath from him!

"Never thought I'd find my little brother on the wrong side of the law!"

They were startled into an awareness of Buck's presence. He had come quietly from the cabin and they hadn't heard him.

He had lit another cigarette. In the moonlight he loomed large like a devil-may-care, grinning silhouette.

"Anne, this is your Uncle Buck," Lon said, hesitantly as if ashamed to acknowledge it.

"Growed up since I seen you last," Buck said. "In the proper light I bet you're doggone pretty."

She had no time for pleasantries, not even the usual handshake of the west. She spoke with the huskiness of desperation. "You'll help us—Uncle Buck?"

His deep throated laugh boomed. "Sure, sure. Glad Lon here is furnishing some excitement for my visit. As soon as they make up their minds—"

The hint was enough. Lon said: "We'd better hit for the Devil's Patch. We can hide there."

Curt mumbled: "And Anne?"

"She's going back to town."

"No—no, Pa!"

Her vehemence shook Lon. He took a step backward. He sensed she was speaking not to him alone but to Curt as well.

"Where you go I'll go." Her voice faltered, but only for an instant.

"Good girl," Buck applauded. "That's the spirit!"

He dropped his cigarette, stomped out its fire. He shot a look at Curt. "Better round up that grub now for the picnic, bub," he snapped crisply. . . .

As the four rode up Bear Valley which a few miles further on terminated into Grant's Pass, a crescent shaped break in the backbone of the Sierra Ahumada, they halted once to wind their horses and look behind them.

As yet they could see no sign of the posse on the trail. But above the hills a red glare had appeared in the east, low on the horizon.

"There goes your cabin," Lon said bitterly. "And they're burning the hay stacks, too, from the looks of it."

Curt's fist on his saddle horn closed into a hard knot of bone and muscle. "I'll make Ike Parsons pay for this if it's the last thing I do," he said in the hard tones of one who has suddenly taken for himself a great objective. "And every damn' one of them with him!"

"You birds keep on you'll be needing the crying towels," Buck jeered with savagery.

His words struck with the sting of a lash. They served their purpose, though, of overcoming their gloomy thoughts.

Buck turned his eyes from the glare. "Come on—let's travel. I'm kind of anxious to see the country."

They took to the trail once more. Saving their horses as much as possible for any contingency that might arise they moved up the valley at a mile eating gait.

Chapter IV

HELL AT DEVIL'S PATCH

TO THE north of Grant's Pass, which forms a passageway through the forbidding Sierra Ahumada, lies the Devil's Patch, a primitive, wild country of upturned granite and volcanic rock.

The land is interlaced with canyons, and the pattern of them could have been no more disorderly if some Paul Bunyan in the dawn of the world had hacked at the place with a gigantic sword while it was in the making.

Indians believed the country to be inhabited by evil spirits and never went there, and in later times Mexicans crossed themselves when the name of it is spoken.

No one has fully explored it, but a sheep-herder was lost in there for a couple of weeks once. When he finally stumbled back to a town he told of secret springs and caves that go down into the ground and are caked with ice at the bottom.

He babbled about seeing the white, bare skeletons of outlaws who'd gone on the dodge in there, and his babbling became so erratic that they had to send him to the state asylum.

Near the heart of the country a gulch springs into being at the foot of Cat's Eye Peak, runs in a southeasterly direction for a number of miles and turning south, widens into Hell Fire Canyon which opens on Bear Valley like a doorway from the Big Pit.

As they approached the entrance of the canyon Lon found himself riding beside Buck; behind them came Curt and Anne.

The sun was an hour above the horizon, and its rays had lifted the morning veils so that the land stood sharply lined before them. The sides of a huge red boulder, glowing ruby-like in the sun, appeared within their view. Lon pointed towards it.

"We'll turn in there," Lon told Buck. "Hole up a few days till things quiet down."

"Looks like a trap to me," Buck grunted. "All they'll need do is plug up the hole."

A taciturn look settled on his face. "Why not go on through the pass and light out for old Mexico? Of course, you may know of a back door where we can work around to the south again."

"I know what I'm doing!" Lon snapped heatedly. "We're not outlaws—"

He paused while a heavy burden pressed down on him again. He'd thrown away everything he hoped for in order to save an innocent man from a blood-thirsty mob's noose. There were some things he balked at, though. His jaws were firm when he finally added: "We're not hitting the owlhoot!"

An enigmatic smile flashed on Buck's lips and a twinkle in his eyes as he glanced swiftly at Lon. He nodded acquiescence to Lon's idea—for the present—and turned his attention back to the trail in front.

Lon led the way across a dry shale bed, skirted a clump of scraggly cedar, and turned into the canyon. They had gone no more than a couple hundred yards up the canyon, however, when the sharp crack of a rifle broke on their right. An infinitesimal fraction of a second's quiet followed the report, to be broken quickly by a fusillade on their left.

Realization that they had run into an ambush slashed hotly into Lon's mind. . . .

Ike Parsons, guessing their plans, had sent men by a short cut through the hills to intercept them here. Ike himself would be coming hell bent with the main posse up Bear Valley.

Out of the inferno of belching guns and the angry lead whipping at them in the cross fire, a slug smashed alongside Lon's jaw; blood flew in a fine red spray before him as the lead ripped through his skin.

He grabbed leather to keep from being knocked out of his saddle, fought to get his horse headed back down the canyon.

He heard a bronc's wild scream, and through the tears that flooded his eyes he saw Curt's mustang bucking. A bullet had creased the animal's rump.

He saw, too, Buck returning the fire with his sixgun. But largest in his vision was the sight of Anne's terror-stricken face.

Lon loosed a frantic yell to Buck that they had to get the hell out of there.

An invisible force pulled at them, and the four raced down the canyon. Curt, his bronc still maddened by the streak of fire that had seared its rump, was in the lead.

They emerged into Bear Valley once more, and Curt turned towards the pass.

But suddenly he swerved, and Lon caught sight of three riders on the road that led upwards to the divide. Ike Parsons' men had blocked that trail!

With the posse coming behind them they would soon be surrounded.

Lon sank spurs into his horse's flank. He cut in on Curt and headed for the south side of the valley. The others pressed close behind him.

They crashed through the underbrush, and when they came to the rugged skirt of Red Butte, Lon turned to the right. He led the others up a steep ascent, winding in and around the huge boulders that lay haphazardly over the slope.

At last they passed through the narrow portal of two towering rocks that was like the door of the wall of a fort.

There they halted and dismounted, and Curt and Buck, drawing their guns, posted themselves to watch the back trail.

Lon was too weak to join them. Blood had stained the front of his shirt and coat, and streaks of pain were shooting through his jaw.

Sobbing at the sight of him, Anne began to work at his wound, using some of the water from the canteen which had become precious now to clean it. She made a handkerchief into a compress, tore a strip from her skirt for a bandage. This last he refused.

He held the handkerchief in place with his hand, saw the blood was clotting and would soon stop.

"Just a scratch," he said.

He sobered, though, when he saw her worried look. His conscience twitched. "Sorry got you in this mess, Anne. Maybe you should have stayed home."

She shook her head, but before she could protest Buck turned around and asked how Lon was.

"Good place here to make a stand," Buck said then. "Or if you like—we can go on up to the top of the butte."

The men who had ambushed and blocked them, evidently considering they had the four cornered anyhow, had hesitated to follow until reinforcements came. They were playing a tight game.

Lon sent a long, thoughtful look downward, saw the dozen little black dots coming up the valley to join those at the foot of the mountain.

"No, Buck," Lon said determinedly. "We'd be fighting the law. Even if we killed every last one of those fellows down there—others'd take their place. They'd keep coming and keep coming till they'd run us down to earth."

"This ain't no time to be a lawyer!"

All his bitterness towards this brother who had brought him nothing but grief was concentrated into one fiery ball within Lon. It rose in his throat and disintegrated into hot words. Before he could speak them, though, Curt turned towards them.

The boy nodded down the hill. "They're coming."

Lon sent a quick glance at Buck. His jaw tensed against the pain throbbing through it. He said: "We can get around to the south of the butte—maybe find a way down into Apache Canyon."

An ironic light appeared in Buck's eyes. "The owlhoot road is a tough one."

"You ought to know!"

"Can you stand it, Pa?" Anne asked, and Curt growled: "Whatever we do—we better be quick about it."

Buck grinned. "Senorita down in Chihuahua been wanting long time to see."

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THE posse advanced cautiously up the slope so that the four were able for the time being to keep ahead of them.

Lon took the lead over tortuous paths and through a break that a contortion of the earth had made in the backbone of the Sierra Ahumada. He came finally to a narrow mesa, the outer rim of which dropped away a thousand feet to Apache Canyon where the trail came down from the summit of Grant's Pass.

A few yards to the left the mesa pinched off. Lon dismounted and walked forward, his heart sinking like lead.

He stood staring at the great gash that had been dug in the mountain by a slide.

Suddenly his eyes narrowed. He swung to the other three, and his gaze was riveted by the leer on Buck face.

"You're at the end of your rope now," Buck grunted. "Have to fight."

"We still can travel," Lon growled. "Look—"

He pointed to a shelf about fifteen feet below where they stood. Loose rock and gravel lay between the two outcroppings, but from the shelf a person might work his way down through the twisted formations to the canyon.

It would be dangerous, yes, but they were desperate!

Lon gave Curt a glance. "Look after Anne, son," he said. "I'll go ahead—try it first. Give a hand with my nag."

Lon gripped the bridle reins and stepped over the edge of the mesa onto the loose rock. Buck slapped the bronc on the rump with his hat, forced the scared animal after him.

Lon slipped to his knees; he dodged once to escape the flailing hoofs of the frightened horse. A fine dust rose about him. A sharp pain stabbed through his leg and burned to the top of his head.

But when at last he felt the firm footing of the shelf beneath him he found he was able to stand. His leg wasn't broken!

He looked upward, waved to the three, and turned to lead his horse down through the intricate maze of rocks.

Lon came finally to an open space where the ground sloped gently to a small creek that was fed by a hidden spring back in the gulch. Without waiting for the others he climbed into the saddle and went forward. He'd have a look in Apache Canyon to be sure none of the posse had come round the pass to intercept them here.

He rode around a huge rampart that jutted into the gulch. Suddenly his horse stopped without command.

Facing Lon was another rider.

For a few seconds the two stared warily at each other. Then recognition flashed in Lon's mind.

This was Tex Calhoun—the hombre he'd seen sending a slug into Anse Gradle.

Close up and in daylight Lon noted the similarity of features that had made him think it had been Buck.

"Hiyah, Tex," Lon greeted coldly.

The man's hand moved imperceptibly towards his gun. He growled: "Who're you?"

A quiet broken only by the cries of magpies descended on them. Lon stiffened, and when he spoke his voice crackled like pine knots in a fire.

"District attorney of Mariposa County. I'm taking you back for highway robbery—and murder!"

The hardcase's Colt leaped. Lon dragged his own sixgun from his shoulder holster; the recoil of it slammed against the palm of his hand.

A thousand thoughts like the wagons of a freight train moved across the plains of his brain. One of them was that the man had heard of Curt's arrest; that was why he had felt safe to camp here.

All this in the time it takes two bullets to pass in midair. Then a giant hammer smashed against his left arm, high up near the shoulder. The shock of it lifted Lon from his saddle, but in the fraction of time he hung suspended before toppling to the ground, he fanned two more shots. . . .

A little later he opened his eyes to see Buck, Anne and Curt working over him. He sat up and mumbled: "Did he—"

Buck's concern changed to a grinning grimace. He shook his head in answer to Lon's question. "Sure got yourself a beauty. That hombre's wanted in half a dozen states."

"He's the bird who killed Anse Gradle," Lon said. "I saw him. We can go back now—they won't hold Curt."

When Buck was finally in his saddle ready to hit the road for the Border he delayed for just a few seconds more. He swept his hat off to Anne, turned again to Lon.

"Had a nice visit," he said. "Don't take no wooden nickels."

He left them, galloping off like a gay caballero, and they watched him until he disappeared down the canyon on his way to Chihuahua. . . .

* * *

"I've swore in every damn' last one of you as deputies," Sheriff Lattimer barked. "There ain't going to be no lynching!"

Lon, Curt and Anne had come up the canyon, leading Tex's horse with its gruesome burden.

They'd met the main body of the posse coming down from the pass. A loop was soon around Curt's neck. The bristles sent a chill down his spine.

"Don't make a mistake, boys," Lon shouted. "Give us a chance and I'll—"

He darted a swift glance at the sheriff. "Look through this hombre's pockets."

Lattimer's search brought forth a wallet. He opened it. "Anse's all right," he grunted. "Got his name inside. Lot of money, too."

"They could have planted it," Ike Parsons protested.

"Hold on just a minute," Lattimer snapped.

The sherriff stooped and lifted the left hind foot of Tex's horse. He said: "Calk of the shoe broke off—just like them tracks we found where Anse was killed."

He stood up and his voice rolled like the rumblings of a volcano getting ready to explode. "Get that rope off that boy's neck. Rest of you put up them guns. We got the right fellow here."

The sheriff rubbed a sore spot on the back of his head. His eyes lingered on Curt and Anne a moment, then to Lon.

"You owe me something for that crack on the noggin back there," he snorted fiercely. "And if I ain't getting an invite to a wedding pretty soon—"

THE END

REDSKINNED FIGHTING MAN

By BRETT AUSTIN

Chief Joseph rallied his warriors.

Hopelessly surrounded by a legion of blue-clad troopers, Chief Joseph gazed once more upon his little group of gaunted braves and starving women—then made his famed, irrevocable decision. . . .

FOR five days the battle between General Miles' troops and the Nez Perce Indians had been seesawing back and forth. Now, on the afternoon of the fifth day, a cold wind swept across the bleak Montana foothills. Snow swirled and eddied and soon a foot of white covered the ground.

That afternoon, the Indian rode into Miles' camp. Right hand held high, unarmed, he had ridden through the soldiers' lines. He was big and gaunt and his eyes were black coals under sunken lids. He dismounted in front of General Miles' tent:

"I am Chief Joseph," he told the sentry.

The sentry said, "General Miles is inside, sir."

Chief Joseph entered the tent and spoke to Miles who stood before him. "My people are hungry and cold, white man. We are tired; our hearts are sick and sad. We will fight no more, ever."

Thus surrendered Chief Joseph.

That was in 1877. Chief Joseph and his band had been ordered by the government to give up their old reservation in eastern Oregon and move onto another one. The Indians were given thirty days to fight or move. They fought—and with a dogged tenacity.

Young, versatile Chief Joseph led his band north, heading for Canada. His original plan called that he cross the Bitterroot Mountains into Montana, go down the Bitterroot valley to the site of the present town of Missoula, then go north through the Kalispel country into Canada.

He crossed the Bitterroots. There, he met General Rawn with his battle troops. Rawn and his men had dug in for a hard fight. Chief Joseph and his two lieutenants, Looking Glass and White Bird, rode out and held a conference with Rawn.

"We mean harm to nobody," said Chief Joseph. "Only let us go peacefully through this valley to the north."

"No," said General Rawn.

Chief Joseph said, "We will be back to talk more tomorrow."

General Rawn went to sleep that night, probably thinking he had the Nez Perce corralled. But, when morning came, he got a great surprise. The Indians had pulled out during the night. And, instead of going north, they had gone south.

General Rawn saw instantly through Chief Joseph's plan. Joseph was leading his tribe on a roundabout way through Montana. He intended to cross the Rockies and then head north.

Ten days later, Chief Joseph fought his first battle. This was in the Big Hole basin, near the town of Dillon, Montana. Here General Gibbon attacked the Nez Perce.

Gibbon and his troops fired down upon the teepees and caught the Indians unawares; the redskins ran for cover, seeking the brush and ravines. General Gibbon took their village much more easily than he had anticipated.

But he did not hold it long. Chief Joseph rallied his warriors and they cleverly surrounded Gibbon. The battle continued for a night and day. Gibbon barely escaped a massacre similar to the Custer massacre.

Gibbon lost sixty-nine men; forty wounded and twenty-nine dead. Chief Joseph, too, lost heavily of warriors and squaws.

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A FEW days later, on the Montana-Idaho border, Chief Joseph took the initiative. He raided General Howard's camp. He stole the horses of Howard's troops and their pack horses. One soldier was killed.

Then, Chief Joseph turned to the west.

Major Hart was ahead, with five companies of cavalry. Howard was behind with six hundred men and a terrible rage. Colonel Sturgis and three hundred men were flanking him. Chief Joseph then executed a great military maneuver.

He slipped unnoticed through Sturgis' troops. Sturgis was scouting the Stinking Water country and Chief Joseph slipped through the Clark's Fork pass. When Sturgis heard this, he swung his troops around. He met Joseph and the Nez Perce on Canon creek.

An all-day battle followed. The troops advanced and the Indians gave ground slowly. The country was rough with ravines and gullies and the Indians found the fighting to their liking.

One thing hindered the Nez Perce. This was the squaws and the papooses and the dogs. But the squaws fought, too. The older children took care of the papooses and the squaws herded horses and fought.

The weather was getting cold, though. October was just around the corner and in Montana winter comes early. Already the

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wind held a threat of snow and the supplies of the Nez Perce were running low.

The Nez Perce had about two thousand head of horses with them. The cavalry man had only one horse. Thus the Indian, by changing horses frequently, always was astraddle a fresh mount.

Sturgis had to give up the fight.

Later, reports showed that Sturgis lost three men and had eleven wounded. Chief Joseph had now fought and whipped three of the West's best commanders. But the West had a great general that Chief Joseph was yet to meet.

This man was General Nelson Miles. The site of Miles City, Montana, was named after him. At this time, General Miles was stationed at Fort Keogh, on the Yellowstone River.

General Miles was a seasoned Indian fighter. He had fought against the southwestern Indians and, after the Custer massacre, he had been moved to Montana to pit his genius against the warring Sioux and Cheyennes.

Miles was ordered to cut off Chief Joseph's retreat. He left Fort Keogh with about five hundred troops. They headed northwest, for already Chief Joseph had crossed the Missouri River.

Chief Joseph crossed the Missouri below Cow creek, a small stream that angles off the south slope of the Bearpaw Mountains. Already rim ice was along the bank of the muddy, snag-filled Missouri. Chief Joseph's squaws were tired and their moccasins were worn thin.

But Chief Joseph still had his lieutenants: Looking Glass, White Bird and Toohul-hul-sote. He had most of his warriors and his squaws and his horses. He had led his people along a perilous path for almost one thousand four hundred miles. He had met and defeated the cream of the Army's generals and their picked troops.

Also, he was only sixty miles from the Canadian border. And, once in Canada, Chief Joseph and his people would be safe from American troops. So, Chief Joseph crossed the Bearpaws.

General Nelson Miles clashed with him on the north slope of the Bearpaws, south of Chinook, Montana. Some historians claim Chief Joseph had made the error of thinking he was already in Canada. Others state that circumstances—his tired warriors and squaws, the cold weather with its blizzard compelled him to strike up a temporary camp.

General Miles had the element of surprise in his favor. Chief Joseph knew that Sturgis and Gibbons were behind him, but he had not known of Miles' march from Fort Keogh.

But Chief Joseph was still a clever psychologist and strategist. To his knowledge of warfare he had added what he had gained from fighting the whites. General Miles expected the Indians to attack—to charge his camp. So he dug in for a hard fight.

But, Chief Joseph's warriors dug in, too. They dug pits and fought from these trenches. When Miles' troops charged the Indians they were driven back, sustaining many losses.

When Chief Joseph had left Oregon, he had had between three hundred fifty and some four hundred men. Miles knew Joseph had lost some, but he didn't know how many. Cold weather and superior numbers had the better of the Nez Perce.

Looking Glass was killed. So was White Bird. Chief Joseph looked at his starving women and papooses. He looked at his gaunt, hawkish warriors. Then, sadly, he mounted his horse and rode toward General Miles' camp, his right hand held high in the Indian sign of peace.

When he surrendered, Chief Joseph had only one hundred braves. True, some had escaped into the hills, but most of them were fatalities. Despite the handicap of woman and children, the sick and the infirm, he marched the one thousand four hundred miles in a little over two months.

Chief Joseph and his tribe were sent to the well-known reservation at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. Afterwards, they were sent to Indian Territory. In 1883 some were sent back to their old home. The next year, others followed.

Chief Joseph never saw his old reservation again. He died on the Colville Reservation in Washington on September 21, 1904.

Today, there is a monument south of Chinook, Montana marking the spot of Chief Joseph's surrender. There is another to his memory in Colville which marks the great warrior's grave.

BLOODHOUND WITH SPURS

By GUNNISON STEELE

Why did Sheriff Tim Shane continue to grill those two cowboy partners about Judd Kipp's killing—after the real murderer had already told him they were innocent?

"I want you to stop lyin'!" Tim hollered.

ONE day Sheriff Timm Shane called me into his office in Truchas, and he said, "Smoky, there's been a killin' out on the Jinglebob. I want you to ride out there and see about it."

Hopefully, I asked, "Who's been killed—Luke Thor?"

"No, it's not Thor. Johnny Red Bear rode by a little while ago and said he'd seen a body in a gully beside Timberwolf Creek half a mile behind the Jinglebob ranch house. He said it looked like Judd Kipp. I figure it was Luke Thor that done it."

Luke Thor and Sam Bodman were partners in the Jinglebob, which joined Judd Kipp's place. I said, "Maybe Sam Bodman done it—"

"Sam Bodman wouldn't hurt a flea," Tim said. "No, I figure it was Luke Thor. Anyway, you ride out there, and I'll clean out a cell while you're gone."

So I did, me being a deputy under Tim, and I found the body sprawled on its face in a gully beside Timberwolf Creek half a mile behind the Jinglebob. It was Judd Kipp, all right, and he was stone dead. I looked about for clues. I found the killer's boot-tracks, but couldn't follow them over the rocky earth.

But, on the ground close to the body, I found something that made me pretty sure

it was Luke Thor who had done it. It was a horse-shoe shaped watch charm, with Luke Thor's initials on it.

So I got back on my horse and headed for the Jinglebob, feeling pretty good. I didn't like Luke Thor, and neither did Tim Shane. Thor was a yellow-haired, swaggering gent—just as big and handsome and arrogant as his partner, Sam Bodman, was runty and homely and meek. But Bodman thought the sun rose and set in big Luke Thor; he didn't seem to mind being sneered at and being kicked about by Thor.

I figured we'd have a quick trial and hang Luke Thor the next Saturday. Not that anybody should hang for putting Judd Kipp away; Judd Kipp was an ornery old cuss that should have been killed long ago.

Sam Bodman was at the barn when I rode up and stopped. He was a bald, pale-eyed little gent. He said, "Howdy, Smoky. Light down and have a drink?"

I said, "Sam, I'm on official business. Judd Kipp's been shot, and he's layin' out yonder behind this here ranch house."

"Is—is he dead?"

"If he ain't he won't ever be. You know who done it?"

"Why, no. Look, Smoky, if you think—"

"I know who done it," I said. "It was Luke Thor. Where is he?"

"L-Luke?" Sam Bodman turned spotted, almost like I'd accused him. "When'd it happen?"

"Six-seven hours ago, I'd say."

"Then Luke didn't do it. Luke went over to Indian Springs early yesterday, and he ain't got back."

"Is that so?" I said. "Then how do you account for this, which I found on the ground beside Kipp?"

Sam looked at the charm, and I could see he was hit hard. Then he looked at me.

He said, "Luke didn't lose that. When he left for Indian Springs yesterday, he forgot his watchfob and left it on the bureau. I—I always wanted to wear it, so I did."

"You mean, you been wearin' that watchfob, instead of Luke?"

"That's right."

I yelled, "It's a lie! If that was so, it'd have to be you that killed Judd Kipp, instead of Luke Thor."

"That's right." Sam Bodman's thin body straightened, and he smiled a little. "No use lyin' any more, I can see that. Me and Judd Kipp got into an argument, over a line fence, and I shot him. I meant to try to lie out of it, but since this come up, I can't let Luke take the blame for somethin' I done."

Well, I took Sam Bodman to town and told Sheriff Shane what had happened, and Tim was fit to be tied. After takin' Kipp's body to the undertaker's, I went back to the sheriff's office.

"You realize what you're doin', Sam?" Silvertip asked. "You're stickin' your neck into a noose. You didn't kill Judd Kipp—that skunky partner of yours, Luke Thor, done it."

Sam showed spirit. "Luke's the best pard any man ever had, and he *couldn't* have done it. He was over at Indian Springs, fifty miles away."

"You *thought* he was. I figure he sneaked back, and done for Kipp. That horseshoe watchfob—"

"I told you about that," Sam said wearily. "I was wearin' it, and I admit I killed Judd Kipp. What more do you want?"

"I want you to stop lyin'!" Tim hollered. "Maybe you'll change your mind, after you stay in the jug a while."

Back in the office, I said, "It won't be much fun, hangin' poor Sam."

"Who said anything about hangin' Sam?" Tim growled. "He didn't kill Judd Kipp—he's lyin', to protect Luke Thor."

"His story sounds pretty straight—"

"Well, we got to unstraighten it. I'm goin' out and pick Luke Thor up, if I can find him. You keep workin' on Sam."

◇ ◇ ◇

PRETTY soon I saw Tim ride out of town, and, as it always did, seeing that sheriff's badge on his shirt-front gave me a queer feeling. You might say that Silvertip and me had took up lawin' kind of by accident. Five years ago, us and a bunch of bad ones had happened into Truchas at about the same time—us with the idea of attractin' as little attention as possible, and the bad ones to take the town apart.

In the ruckus that followed, the outlaws made two mistakes. They killed the sheriff, and they mistook Silvertip and me for honest citizens and started kickin' us about. After we'd cleaned up the bad bunch, we

found ourselves heroes. It was a pretty good set-up, so we stayed, even takin' honest jobs; and pretty soon Tim found himself elected sheriff, with me his deputy.

Some folks, though, had made it pretty hard for us, and one of them was Luke Thor. Another was Judd Kipp. Now Kipp was gone, and for a while it had looked like Luke Thor was too; but now Sam Bodman had gummed the works. Sam was our friend. I didn't believe he had killed Judd Kipp—I figured he was lying to protect Luke Thor.

It was nearly dark when Tim got back.

"Did you find Luke Thor?" I asked.

"I found where he'd been, anyway. Has Sam admitted he was lyin'?"

"He still swears he done it."

Tim went back to the cell. Sam looked tired and pale there on the bunk.

"Look, Sam," said Tim. "I know why you're lyin'—but Luke Thor ain't worth it."

Sam's pale eyes lighted at mention of Luke. "He'll come back, soon as he hears I'm in trouble. He'll tell you like I did—that he left his watchfob on the bureau when he left. When I shot Judd Kipp, I grabbed for my six-shooter so quick I must have broke the chain—"

"Kipp was killed with a rifle!"

Sam blinked. "That's what I mean, when I grabbed my rifle."

"Sam," Tim said, "there's somethin' I ain't told you, and I hoped I wouldn't have to. I didn't find Luke, but I found out what happened. Before headin' for Indian Springs yesterday, he rode into Truchas. You know that five thousand dollars you and him got for the cattle you sold two weeks ago?"

"It's in the bank," Sam nodded. "It's to pay off old Asa Karnes' mortgage."

"*Was* in the bank," Tim said. "It was a joint account, like you know. Well, yesterday Luke Thor rode into town and drew out every cent of the money. Then, after sneakin' back and killin' Judd Kipp on Jinglebob land—hopin', I reckon, that you'd get the blame—he rode on to Indian Springs. He was mixed up with a honky-tonk girl over there named Taos Gertie, and they run off together last night, headin' north with the five thousand."

"You sure of that?"

" 'Course I'm sure. The skunk! Besides leavin' you to stretch hemp, you'll lose your outfit besides."

Sam Bodman was quiet a long time, sitting with his face in his hands.

Then Sam looked up at us.

"I wasn't lyin'," he said. "I killed Judd Kipp. Luke Thor is my partner, and he's the swellest, bravest, squarest gent that ever lived. If he took our money, and run off with a honkytonk girl, I know he had a good reason for it."

Sheriff Shane kicked a chair across the cell, and he yelled, "Hell's hogpen—I never saw a man so eager to hang! But I won't do it. If Luke Thor didn't kill Judd Kipp, then nobody did. The blasted old goat committed suicide!"

"Then where's the rifle he done it with?" I asked. "And what about Sam's confession, and that watchfob of Thor's?"

"Judd Kipp's throat was cut, far as I know," Tim said. "I didn't hear no confession—and I think you told a damn' lie about findin' that watchfob in the first place."

So we turned Sam Bodman loose, and pretty soon I went over to the livery stable where Tim had Luke Thor locked up and turned *him* loose.

It made me feel good inside, seeing Sam Bodman's homely face light up when he realized that Luke Thor hadn't stolen their cow money and run off with that gal.

It was years later, and a long distance from Truchas, before I got the straight of it. If he hadn't been mellowed by a few drinks, maybe Tim wouldn't have told me.

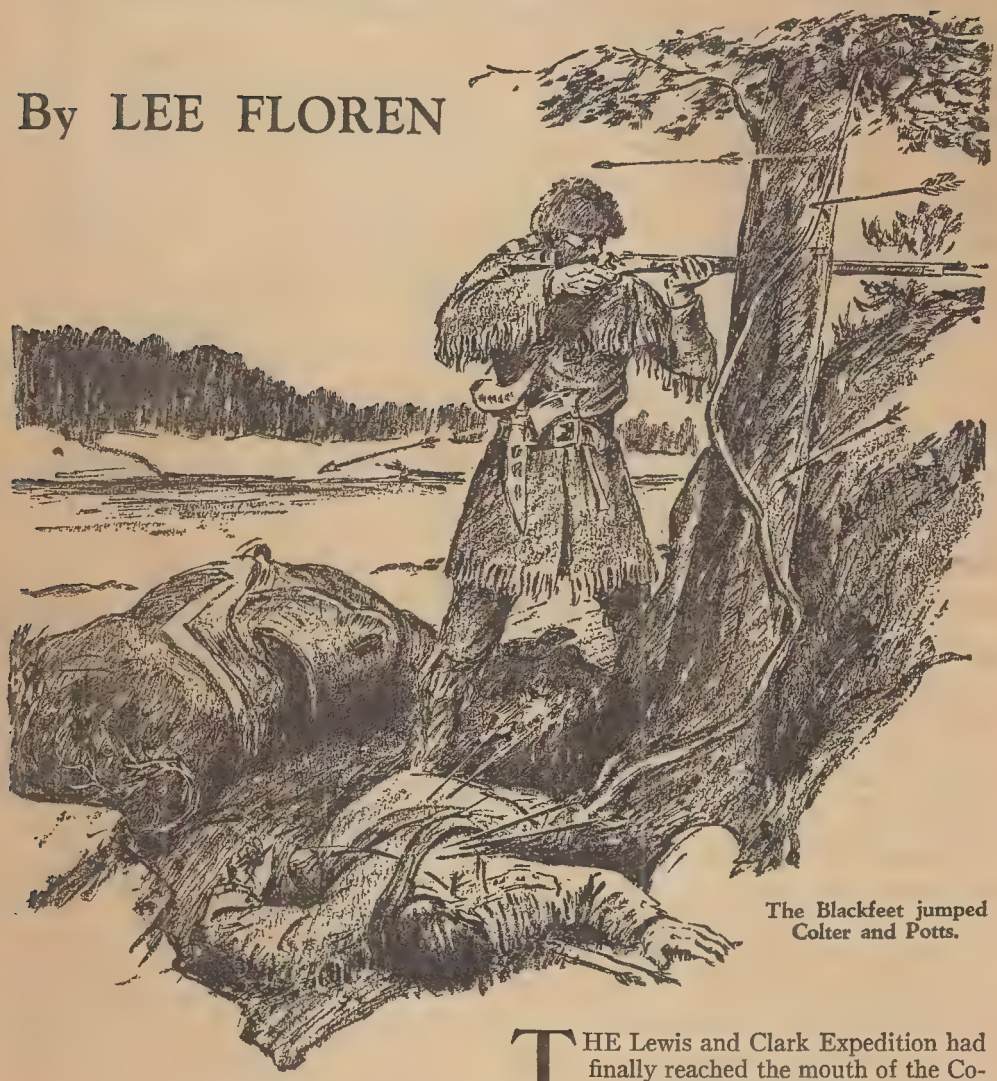
"Soon as I asked some questions, I knew Luke Thor couldn't have done it," he said. "That's where I made my mistake—not findin' out beforehand that Luke had gone to Indian Springs the day before. I was at the Jinglebob that mornin'. I knew Kipp's body was there in the gully. I'd found Luke Thor's watchfob on the trail a few days before, and I left it there on the ground, figurin' to hang the skunk for some of the other things I knowed he'd done."

"But what made you so sure Sam didn't kill him?"

"Because I done it myself," Tim said. "Kipp had found out we used to ride the owlhoot. He tried to blackmail me, and we had it out there beside the creek. . . ."

WILDERNESS TAMER

By LEE FLOREN



The Blackfeet jumped Colter and Potts.

Only two members of the original Lewis and Clark Expedition failed to make the home journey back to St. Louis. One lay deep in a Northwest grave, the other, tall, buckskin-clad Virginian John Colter, remained in that raw, hostile wilderness to carve out a name that would inspire a nation. . . .

THE Lewis and Clark Expedition had finally reached the mouth of the Columbia River, and now Old Glory waved on the gray sands of the Oregon coastline. The end of the trek was at hand; the long trip home to St. Louis was ahead. To a man, the expedition members looked forward to the homeward trip, even though it meant passing through the hostile territories of the Sioux, the Gros Ventres, the Kalispels. Only two members of the expedition would never return to the East. One of these men was dead, his grave marked by a rock monument, but the other was very much alive.

He said, "I'm stayin' in the West, Lewis."

Captain Meriwether Lewis said, "All right with me, Colter. You know this country and its dangers."

"I'm stayin' to trap," said Colter.

So, when the Lewis and Clerk Expedition turned again toward the East, a tall, wide-shouldered Virginian, wearing smoke-tanned buckskin, stayed behind to catch beaver, mink, marten, and other peltry.

Having a horse for his only companion, John Colter spent the winter in the wilderness and when spring came, he went down the Yellowstone in his canoe, carrying his pelts through the hostile lands of the Sioux and Crows. He came to the Missouri, passed down it, came to a spot where trappers were encamped. Here he met Manuel Lisa, the trader, and out of that chance encounter came the idea of a string of forts—trading posts—in the Northwest.

Colter was the peace-maker of the expedition. Alone and with right hand raised high, he would ride into the camps of the Crow, Cheyenne and Sioux and Blackfeet, a tall buckskin clad man astraddle a tough horse.

Colter knew a few Indian words, they knew little of his language. Surrounded by white-haired warriors, seamy-faced medicine-men, lithe young bucks, mistrusted and suspected he would use sign-language and, in the end, the Indians would promise to bring his company their furs.

One day his travels to procure Indian furs for the company took him to a spot in northern Wyoming. Beside him, a steamy geyser threw up boiling water, its steam sizzling and popping. One of the first men to see what is now Yellowstone National Park, he told the tale of this wilderness wonder—and men doubted his word; that was incidental, though; he was prospering slowly, and the work was interesting.

But the Northwest Fur Co. was, due to competition, turning the Blackfeet against John Colter. One day not much afterwards, on the Three Forks River, the Blackfeet jumped John Colter and John Potts. Potts, pierced by some twenty feathered arrows, was killed. John Colter had to surrender.

THE Indians stripped him naked, preparatory to the intended torture. Somehow, he got away, and the race for life began. Seven days later, his bare feet torn by rocks and cacti, his skin ripped by thorny rosebushes and bullberry prongs, John Colter staggered into his post on the Bighorn.

Friendly hands grasped him, and held his sagging weight. They lifted the half-frozen, bleeding man and carried him to heat and food and drink. There, he told his story.

"I reached the river," he said. "I dived into it, and there was a raft of driftwood, so I got under this and found a place where the logs were piled up."

"Yes, an' then?"

"The Blackfeet searched the river, but couldn't find me. They left at dark and I started home."

Hardy trappers looked at each other, their eyes showing amazement. "That's over a hundred an' fifty miles away," said one, awed. "You came all this way, John? Without clothes or shoes or grub or gun?"

"I ate roots," said John Colter.

"You'd better go back to St. Louis," said Manuel Lisa, finally. "Go an' get a long rest, John."

But John Colter kept on trapping, and trying to make peace with the Blackfeet. But the influence of the Northwest Fur Company was too great, and the Americans could make no progress in that section of Montana. But the peace John Colter had made with the Crows was a lasting peace, built on faith and righteous treatment of the Indian by the white trader.

John Colter kept on his good work. He knew the passes across the mountains—the Teton Pass and Union Pass and Last Chance Pass—and he was invaluable to expeditions pushing off into the Northwest. He supplied the John Jacob Astor expedition with maps when it went to start the great trading post at the mouth of the surging Columbia River.

Tall and straight, picturesque in fringed buckskin, this man saw the fur business rise to its full height, and he also saw it slowly decline. He saw his friends slowly but surely pass from the picture of frontier life. Some died peacefully in bed, some because of accidents, others passed before Indian arrows or Indian lead. And when his time came to its allotted end he went like a true frontiersman—unafraid.

GUN-GHOST OF LOST VALLEY

By
BILL GULICK

Chapter I

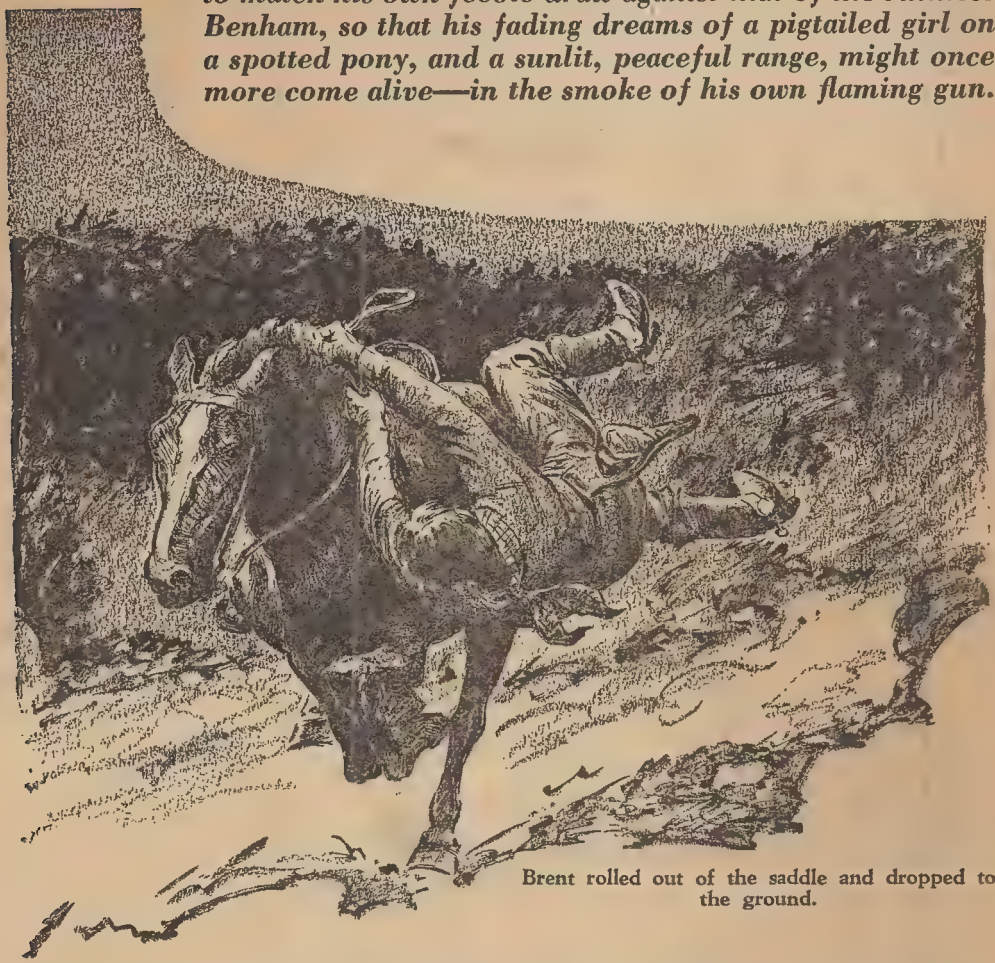
RETURN OF THE PIODIGAL

LOST VALLEY dozed quietly under the burning afternoon sun as the lone rider moved along its solitary, dusty street. The street, flanked with squalid, weather-gray frame buildings, showed no sign of life except for a pair of mongrel dogs quarreling indifferently over a bone in the shade of the livery stable. Nothing had changed, Brent Lacy was thinking. The sleepy cow-town, the rolling miles of grazing land surrounding it, the tall blue mountains guarding the valley—all were the same.

Nothing was changed—except himself.

He knew that now, knew he had been a fool to return to the valley because of an unexplainable yearning that had come to him as he lay on the sick-bed, his body

Brent Lacy, stove-up cow-country prodigal, was willing to match his own feeble draw against that of the ruthless Benham, so that his fading dreams of a pigtailed girl on a spotted pony, and a sunlit, peaceful range, might once more come alive—in the smoke of his own flaming gun.



Brent rolled out of the saddle and dropped to the ground.

Vivid Novel of A Hunted Man's Return to Hell

wracked by disease. He had been a damn' fool. He shouldn't have come back.

Upstreet a screen door slammed in the afternoon stillness, and a man wearing a shining badge on his shirt front stepped out on the porch of the general store. Brent recognized him instantly. Now I'll find out if they remember, he thought.

The lean, middle-aged man shaded his eyes against the sun glare as he watched Brent approach. Brent reined the sorrel in when he drew even with the porch, touched his hat politely and said, "Afternoon, Sheriff. Where in this town can a man find something to dampen his throat?"

A friendly smile cracked the lean man's leathery face. "The Happy Time Saloon up in the next block has got anything from milk to firewater. 'Course, you might have to wake Mike up to get it."

Brent thanked him and turned away. As he headed upstreet, the friendly, impersonal smile stayed on the sheriff's face. "You're welcome, stranger," he called after him.

Stranger, Brent thought swiftly. So Abe Jensen hadn't recognized him. That meant he could do as he had planned—he could ride through the valley slowly, looking, remembering, satisfying to the full this strange nostalgia that had grown as the fever lessened. No one would know he had returned. That was the way he wanted it. He would linger only a day or so; then

he would ride out of the valley for the last time, ride on to wherever the trail might lead. He asked for no more.

At the rail in front of the Happy Time, he racked the sorrel and dismounted. The movement made his head suddenly spin dizzily and his legs grow weak. Putting one hand to his throbbing temples, he leaned heavily against the rail. His mind cursed his body's weakness.

The spell passed in a moment and he went into the saloon. There were no customers. Behind the bar, a large red-faced man leaned lazily against a beer keg while he polished the back-bar mirror with a dirty white colth. He turned and looked at Brent.

"What's for you?"

"Whiskey."

The bartender sat it out and Brent handed him a coin. As he sipped the potent liquid he stared somberly at his own reflection in the mirror. *Ten years,* he thought. He'd been a kid, then, rebellious, headstrong, eager for life and the world beyond the mountains. And now? He studied the figure in the mirror and did not smile.

The face was thin to a point of gauntness. The skin was white, unhealthily white. A long, straight scar ran across the bridge of the nose and left eyebrow, giving one side of his face a perpetual, sardonic smile, while the other side remained stolid as an Apache's. Only the eyes—gray and piercing—seemed alive.

The bartender picked up the cloth and smeared a soapy substance over a portion of the mirror. Suddenly he turned around and said, "There's something familiar about you, stranger. Don't I know you? Don't you belong in the valley?"

Brent looked at him steadily. "No," he said in a quiet voice. "I don't belong in the valley. I never did."

The bartender frowned. "Funny. There was a kid—ten, twelve years ago, I guess it was. Kid name of Curly."

Without speaking, Brent took off his hat. The hair was short and straight as a string. The bartender stared for a moment, then laughed good naturedly. "That's one on me, all right. Reckon nobody ever called you Curly." He refilled Brent's whiskey glass. "This is my treat. It ain't often Mike Donahough gets fooled on a face."

Brent smiled his thanks, and lifted the glass. Donahough drew himself half a schooner of beer from the keg, downed it with no apparent effort, and wiped the foam from his mustache with the back of a hand. "You figure on locating here?" he asked cautiously.

"Maybe," Brent lied. "Any of the outfits hiring?"

"Well, Jake Reid says he'd take on a hand if he could find one."

"Got a big spread, has he?"

Donahough shrugged contemptuously. "Just a shoestring outfit like most of 'em. Fact is, there ain't but one big ranch in the valley."

"Who owns it?"

"Harvey Benham. The Bar Cross is his brand. Pays top wages, Benham does."

Brent stared down at the whiskey glass. "Fellow I met down the trail a ways told me there was a spread in the valley called the Lazy S," he said, carelessly. "I suppose it's one of the shoestring outfits?"

Donahough scowled and picked up the rag and polished furiously on the mirror for a few moments. Finally he said, "No, it ain't. Fact is, it's bigger than the Bar Cross. But size ain't what counts, sometimes."

"Afraid I don't see what you mean," Brent said.

"I don't expect a stranger would," Donahough grunted. He studied Brent for a moment, then leaned toward him and shook the rag threateningly at his face. "Nobody ever accused Mike Donahough of sticking his nose into somebody else's business. But facts is facts. The Lazy S ain't been the same since old man Edwards died. Harvey Benham wants it. And he'll get it. Mark my word, before the year is out every cow in the valley will be wearing the Bar Cross brand." He paused, then said, "Take it for what it's worth."

Brent let his breath out in a long, quiet sigh. He said, "How does a man get to the Bar Cross?"

"Take the trail straight west out of town. You can't miss it."

"Thanks," Brent said. "Guess I'll be riding."

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MAIN Street petered out at the edge of town, dissolving into two trails, one of which led west and the other north. When Brent reached the fork, he

did not hesitate; with only a glance at the west bound trail he swung the sorrel north toward the Lazy S.

So Edwards was dead, he mused. That was a bit of news he hadn't expected. Not that it changed his plans—nothing could change them now—but it was always something of a shock to discover that the world moved on, that old friends died, that old things which you had thought could never change did change. He tried to picture the Lazy S as a weakening, dying ranch instead of the power it once was in the valley, but could not. It just wasn't possible at all.

The heat of the afternoon had lessened and long blue shadows were creeping across the plain from the mountains to the west when he rode into the yard at the Lazy S. An odd choking sensation came to his throat at sight of the rambling single-story ranch house and his mind leaped back across the years to a day when a boy had turned in his saddle for one last look at the only home he had ever known. He felt irritated that it should disturb him now.

There was no one about the house. He rode past it, circled around the bunkhouse, then saw a slim, denim clad figure walking toward him from the direction of the corral. He reined up and waited.

As the slim figure came nearer, he saw it was a girl. He touched his hat brim and said, "Howdy. I was wondering if I could get some water and grain for my horse."

The girl inspected him silently for a moment, her face unsmiling. She wore a checkered flannel shirt, faded waist overalls and a pair of scuffed, down-at-the-heel boots. Her hair was a sandy color and her skin was a fresh, healthy nut-brown. Her eyes held a slight sun-squint; they were sharp blue in color and regarded him now in swift, direct appraisal.

"Who are you?" she asked.

"Name's Brent Lacy," he said.

"Where you from?"

Outside." He made a vague gesture with a shoulder. "I've been riding pretty steady for a week and my horse is just about done up. If you could oblige with some grain. . . ."

"Are you looking for a job?" she cut in, "or just drifting?"

"Reckon you'd say I was just drifting, ma'am."

A faint shadow clouded her eyes for a moment, then she said, "There's grain and water in the barn. Help yourself. You'll find hay and burlap there, too, if you want to rub him down."

Brent thanked her, and dismounted and led the sorrel through the corral and into the barn. The girl did not follow him. He kept thinking about her as he unsaddled the sorrel. Those blue eyes, that direct way of looking at you—they were unmistakable features that told him she must be Edwards' daughter. Camelia Edwards. He scowled, forcing his mind back across the years, remembering an eager, bright eyed girl for whom he had broken a spotted pony.

Ten years ago that was, he thought. She had been eight or nine then; he, fifteen. He laughed softly at himself now, remembering how disgusted he had felt that he, a full grown man in his own eyes, could be wheedled into breaking a pony for a girl in pigtails. He wondered if she remembered.

When he had taken care of the sorrel's needs, he left it in the stall and walked leisurely to the barn door which opened on the corral. He paused there and leaned against the door jamb while he fashioned a cigarette. He could see Camelia Edwards standing outside the corral, her back to him, talking to a heavy-set cowboy who was mounted on a paint horse and halter-leading a rangy dun. Their voices came to him plainly through the quiet dusk, and the drone of insects.

"You're back early, Williams," she said. "Did the boys finish up on the north section?"

"I dunno." Williams' voice was resentful, surly. "I rode in to get my pay. I'm quittin'."

"Quitting? Why?"

"That's my business."

The girl looked at him closely for a moment, then took a piece of paper from a pocket and scribbled something on it with a stub of a pencil. She handed it to him. "Take that to the bank. They'll pay you. I suppose you're going to work for Harvey Benham?"

Williams folded the note and stuck it in his pocket. "What if I am? He'll pay me twice what I'm making here."

There was a silence in which Brent could feel the girl's contempt for the stocky cow-

boy. Then she said in a flat, tired voice, "Get out. The Lazy S is better off without your kind. But leave the dun. He doesn't belong to you."

Williams' voice was dogged and thick. "Reckon the dun goes with me. I had two horses when I came here and I'm goin' to have two when I leave. I rode one horse to death workin' for you an' I got a right to replace it."

"I don't replace horses that are killed because their owners mistreat them," the girl snapped. "You were drunk when you killed the sorrel. Now drop that halter."

Brent moved quietly out the barn door and started walking across the corral. Both Williams and the girl were too preoccupied to notice him. "You can go straight to hell!" Williams growled suddenly, and sank cruel spurs to the paint.

The animal reared and started to bolt. The girl leaped forward and seized the halter of the dun. Williams cursed, turned in the saddle and lashed out at her arm with his quirt. She screamed involuntarily.

A red surge of anger blazed through Brent. He broke into a run, vaulted the corral fence, and jerked Williams out of the saddle.

The heavy-set cowboy hit the ground with a solid jolt, grunting at the sudden shock. Stumbling to his feet, he let out a roar of rage and charged at Brent. Brent measured the distance coldly, waited until Williams was in close, then sidestepped and swung a sharp, crisp right flush to the jaw.

The impact of fist on bone drove a paralyzing shock up his arm. Williams lurched dizzily, then fell to the ground face forward. He lay there only a moment and Brent knew he was just dazed, not badly hurt. Brent drew his gun.

Williams stumbled to his feet, shook his head to clear it, then started toward Brent. Suddenly he saw the gun and brought up short.

"Get on that horse!" Brent snapped. "The lady said to be ridin'."

Williams kept looking at the gun. He sneered. "You're mighty quick to pull iron, stranger. Wonder if that yellow streak down your back is the reason?"

Brent thumbed the hammer of the Colt back. The girl looked at him swiftly, frowning, then turned to Williams. "Get out!" she said.

Williams shrugged and swung aboard the paint. "Sure, I'm goin'. There's only one way to argue with a gun—and that's with another gun. Next time I see you, stranger, I'll be careful to shoot first and talk afterwards."

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BRENT watched him as he rode out of the yard and down the trail toward town. Slowly, then, he holstered his gun. The girl was looking at him strangely, no longer making any effort to conceal the contempt in her eyes. "I guess I should thank you," she said. "But was it necessary to pull a gun on him?"

Brent shook his head vaguely and looked down at the ground. His heart was pounding painfully and a darkness was closing in over his eyes. A terrible nausea clutched at his throat. Putting a hand to his throbbing temples, he reached out for something to support him. "I—I better sit down," he muttered.

Suddenly he felt a slim pair of shoulders under his arm, heard a dim voice say, "Why didn't you tell me you were sick, cowboy? Lean on me. I'll help you to the house?"

"Not sick. . . ." he said thickly. "Just the fever—the fever. . . ."

"Keep still and try to walk."

He did not faint, but he had no recollection later of how he reached the house. For a long time the mist rolled before his eyes, the roaring pounded in his ears. Then gradually both subsided and he realized he was lying on a couch in a dusk filled room and someone was holding a glass to his lips, urging him to drink.

He shuddered and tried to sit up. The whiskey burned through his veins.

"Easy," the girl said, and put a hand on his chest.

He looked at her, then sighed and relaxed against the pillow. She pulled a chair up close to the couch. She said, "You shouldn't be traveling in your shape."

He felt suddenly ashamed of himself and once again cursed the terrible weakness of his body. "I'll be all right," he said. "It's just the after-effects of the fever."

"Fever?"

"Typhoid. I picked it up in Cuba."

"You were in the war, then?"

He nodded, and absently touched the scar on his forehead. Her eyes rested on his face for a long moment, then she arose and said, "You lie there and rest. I'll fix something to eat. The boys will be in soon and they'll make room for you in the bunkhouse. You're going to stay here until you're well."

"I got to be riding," he protested.

"I thought you said you were just drifting?"

Their eyes locked, then he looked away and nodded. "I shouldn't have told you that," he said.

She smiled. "And you shouldn't try to argue with a woman, either," she answered, and left the room.

After she had gone, he lay for a long time staring up at the ceiling. A strange feeling of peace stole over him. His eyelids grew heavy, and as he drifted off into a deep, restful sleep, his last waking thought was of a pigtailed girl and a spotted pony. He wondered what ever became of that spotted pony.

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IT WAS long after dark when Brent awakened. He felt like a new man. Rest, the army doctors had told him, was all that he needed, but he had gotten little rest in the New Orleans hospital to which the returning troop-ship brought him. The moist, clammy, dead heat of the swampy metropolis kept him bathed in sticky perspiration. The low ceilinged room and the constant noise of the city streets made him feel as if he were in prison and he longed for the open sky, the solitude, the clean dry wind of the western rangeland where he had spent most of his life.

So the doctors had let him go, warning him to rest as much as he could, to go home and take it easy. Home? He had laughed sardonically under his breath at the word.

A lamp was burning in the kitchen, and he got up now and went into the other room. Camelia Edwards was working over some account books, and when she heard his step she looked up and smiled. He smiled back.

"How do you feel?"

"Fine."

"I let you sleep because I thought you needed rest more than food. I've kept supper warm so you better sit down and eat now. When you've finished, I'll take you out to the bunkhouse and introduce you to the boys."

He ate in silence and she went back to her work as if oblivious of his presence. When he had finished, she took him out to the bunkhouse and introduced him to the men, then left him with them. Somebody had brought in his war-bag and laid it on a vacant bunk at one corner of the room. The men were polite to him and asked no questions, but he could see a suppressed curiosity in their eyes. The air was filled with a bristling tension.

There were half a dozen cowboys in the crew. Jick Spellman, a lanky, quiet-spoken man of about fifty, was the foreman. The other hands, Hargis, Mac, Sleepy, Montana, and Bat, were apparently men of the breed to be found in any bunkhouse. An aged Mexican sat quietly back in the shadows near Brent's bunk and did not come forward to be introduced. He sat as quiet and stolid as a statue.

Brent exchanged commonplaces about the weather with Jick Spellman for a while, then went over to his bunk and sat down and pulled off his boots. A couple of the cowboys went outside for a final breath of fresh air before turning in. Brent glanced swiftly around the room, then seeing that no one was near leaned toward the Mexican and whispered, "Felipe?"

The old man's wrinkled face did not change and he kept staring straight ahead. "It is good to have you back, señor," he murmured softly in Spanish. His voice was tired and gentle.

"You know who I am, then?"

"But of course. I knew when you came in the door."

"How? It's been a long time, Felipe. Ten years. My face has changed; the fever straightened my hair. I saw Abe Jensen his afternoon. He didn't recognize me in the slightest.

Felipe laughed softly. "The sheriff has two eyes, my son, and the eyes may be fooled. But the ear and the heart do not forget. That is all I have left now."

The old Mexican still stared off into the distance, and suddenly Brent knew why. Leaning close, he looked into Felipe's eyes. The old man was blind, stone blind. He felt his heart wrench.

Chapter II

DEATH RIDES AT NIGHT

THE fact gave Brent a sudden shock, yet he realized that Felipe was old, very old. He had been a wrangler here at the Lazy S as far back as Brent could remember. He had taught him all he knew about horses.

Brent said softly, "I'm sorry. Your eyes —how long have they. . . .?"

Felipe shrugged patiently. "Five, perhaps six years. It does not matter. What the gods will, must be. I wish only that I might have my sight back for one moment so that I could see your face. You were in the war?"

"Yes. I was with the Rough Riders."

"*Por Dios,* they were good fighters! I knew you would ride wtih them. And I knew you would come back. We need you."

Brent looked down at his hands, clenched them until the knuckles showed white. "I hear the ranch is in trouble," he said. "What's it all about?"

Felipe shrugged. "It is this Señor Benham. He is no good. He wanted the señorita, but she would have none of him so now he tries to ruin us."

"How?"

"He hires away our men. He makes the whole valley afraid of him so no one will buy our cattle. But it is mostly with the bank in Lost Valley he makes trouble. I do not understand such matters, but the bank holds some kind of paper on the ranch."

"A mortgage?"

Felipe nodded. "That is it. He makes them tell us we must pay soon, but we cannot pay unless we sell cattle and no one will buy."

"Can't you sell them outside the valley?"

"That is what the señorita says to do. Even now, the men are making a roundup and next week they will drive a herd out of the valley. But Señor Benham will make trouble. I feel it."

Brent stared silently down at the floor for a long time.

Felipe seemed to sense his thoughts. "You will help us?" the aged Mexican asked. "You will stay and fight with us?"

Brent did not look up. "No," he muttered. "I'm just passing through."

"But, señor, why did you come back?"

Brent shook his head. "I don't know. Just for a look at the valley, I guess. I got to be riding on."

Felipe did not speak for a time. Then at last he said gently, "What the gods will, a man must do."

There was no accusation, no condemnation in the aged wrangler's voice, yet Brent felt strangely ill at ease.

"You must promise to tell no one who I am," he said thickly. "Understand?"

"*Si,* I understand, señor," Felipe answered. Then he arose stiffly from the chair and shuffled across the room to his bunk, feeling his way with measured, careful steps as the blind must do. Brent slowly rolled a cigarette and lit it. He sat on the edge of his bunk smoking long after the lamp had been extinguished and the rest of the cowboys had gone to bed.

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BRENT stayed at the Lazy S for nearly a week. He asked Camelia Edwards to let him help with the roundup but she flatly refused. He tried to make himself useful by doing the small chores around the ranch house, but was blocked there by Felipe, who despite his blindness and age, still took care of the stock, carried in wood, and kept the bunkhouse clean.

"The señorita says you are sick and are to do nothing but rest," he told Brent firmly.

So Brent spent the long, lazy days lounging in the sun and following Felipe around as the old man did his chores. Strength returned gradually. The whiteness of his face melted into brown as the sun did its work, and he could feel his gaunt body filling out with solid flesh as good food and plenty of sleep and fresh air had their effect.

He saw very little of Camelia. Occasionally in the evenings she came out to the bunkhouse when the men were lounging about outside and talked to them, but she never said anything to him other than to ask how he was feeling. She seemed preoccupied and worried much of the time. Often he saw the lamp gleaming from the kitchen window far into the night.

Sunday, the crew did not work. Sitting in the shade in front of the bunkhouse during the afternoon, Brent felt the old rest-

lessness stir again and knew that the time had come for him to be riding on. He told Camelia about it when she came out of the house.

She was wearing a dress for the first time since he had come to the Lazy S, a pale blue silk that made her look like an entirely different person from the capable, crisp-spoken ranch owner he had learned to know and admire. He felt ill at ease.

"I wanted to thank you for letting me stay here," he said. "Guess I'll be riding on in the morning."

She looked at him closely and nodded in approval. "You look a hundred per cent better. Sure you feel all right? You're welcome to stay as long as you like."

"I feel fine. But I was wondering—as long as you wouldn't let me work for my keep, I ought to pay. . . ."

"Don't be foolish," she cut in crisply. She turned away as if dismissing the matter, and said to Jick Spellman, "Come in the house a minute, Jick. I want to talk to you."

Brent watched them walk away, then he went into the bunkhouse and packed his few possessions in his war-bag. Mac, Sleepy and Montana were playing stud at the table, and they eyed him curiously but made no comment. They had never accepted him as one of them. He knew that they viewed him with the polite curiosity that strong, healthy men who have never known a day of sickness have toward the weak.

He was lying on his bunk smoking when he heard a horse trotting up outside. The three cowboys at the table broke off their card game and left the room, and he stubbed out his cigarette and followed.

Jick Spellman was standing in front of the bunkhouse, staring hostilely up at a big man mounted on a magnificent bay horse. Brent's glance flicked to the brand on the bay's shoulder. When he saw it was the Bar Cross brand, he knew that the rider must be Harvey Benham.

He was a large man, but his size was his least impressive feature. He had a strong, compelling face marked with lines of pride and arrogance. His eyes were cool and steady, and in them Brent could see an unquenchable desire for power, a desire which would make the man ruthlessly crush all who tried to oppose his wishes.

Jick's face was a frozen mask; a mask, Brent suspected, that concealed an awe of the Bar Cross owner. "What do you want, Benham?" he asked stiffly.

Benham smiled, letting his eyes run lightly over the cowboys standing in front of the bunkhouse. "One of my riders claims you've got a horse that belongs to him. I came to get it."

"Williams?" Jick said.

"Yeah."

"Why didn't he come himself?"

"I wouldn't let him. Afraid he might lose his temper and hurt somebody."

Brent heard the back door of the ranch house open, and Camelia came out. She regarded Benham coolly. Here, Brent thought, was one who was not afraid of him.

"Well?" she snapped.

Benham touched his hat with a careless gesture that was more a gesture of derision than of politeness. "I came after a dun horse that belongs to Williams," he said.

"You know you aren't going to get that dun. You knew it when you came."

Benham nodded slowly. "Yeah. But I just wanted to make sure." He shifted in the saddle a little, leaning forward. "I hear you're making a roundup. Figure on selling the cattle in the valley?"

"You know we're not."

"Too bad the market's shot here. Now, I shouldn't do this, but I'll make you an offer on them myself."

"No thanks. We'll sell where we can get what they're worth."

Benham shrugged. "Do as you like. But you're going to have a long, hard drive. And with the small crew you've got—" He turned at waved a hand at Jick, Sleepy, Montana and Mac, and raised his eyebrows expressively.

Brent knew that the crew was pitifully small. Counting Hargis and Bat, who were guarding the gather now, there were only half a dozen cowboys. The Lazy S needed twice that number.

"We can get along," Camelia said. "Now, get out, Benham."

The Bar Cross owner's eyes had fallen on Brent. He studied him carefully, measuring him as if he were an animal on the hoof. "New hand?" he said. He archly raised an eyebrow.

Brent felt the nerves bunch between his

shoulder blades. "Just passing through," he answered.

Benham nodded. "You're the man I want, then. Williams sent a message."

"For me?" Brent said.

"Yeah. He told me to tell you to get out of the valley. He said if you don't get out under your own power—and soon—you'll be carried out—feet first."

Benham wheeled the bay around, then, touched his hat brim to Camelia, and rode off at a gallop. Jick's face was white with impotent rage. "I ought to kill him!" he muttered hoarsely.

Camelia shot her foreman a sharp glance, then said to Brent, "I want to talk to you."

Brent walked with her away from the others, and as he did so he could feel their eyes following him. He knew what they were thinking.

Out of earshot of the cowboys, Camelia stopped and looked at him and said, "You'd better not wait till morning to go. I'll have Montana and Mac ride with you as far as the end of the valley—just in case there's trouble. Are you packed?"

Brent did not meet her eyes. He stared to the west where an orange sun was sinking now between two jagged blue peaks and he watched the play of vivid color in the bleeding sunset sky. He said slowly, "I'm packed. But I'm not going."

She frowned. "Don't be a fool! This isn't your fight."

"I'm going to make it mine."

"Suppose I don't let you stay?"

"Then I'll ride over to the Bar Cross and call Williams out for a showdown. Afterwards, I'll come back and hit you up for a job."

A slight smile touched her lips, spread upward to her eyes. "That won't be necessary," she said quietly. "You've got a job now."

Brent turned away and walked back to the bunkhouse. None of the cowboys spoke. Inside, he went to his bunk and unpacked his war-bag. He heard a movement behind and turned to see Mac, Sleepy, and Montana standing by the card table watching him.

Montana suddenly growled, "Hey, Lacy, how about sittin' in on this stud game? We'd just as soon take your money as anybody's."

Brent grinned and crossed the room. "Take my money, hell! I'll show you how poker ought to be played."

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HE RODE out with the crew for the first time next morning to help with the roundup. The Lazy S range extended to the mountains which bounded the north side of the valley and it was from the broken, brush covered foothills that the cattle were being gathered in. The work was slow and tedious. Cowboys combed the arroyos in pairs flushing out half-wild, nimble-footed steers, sometimes taking several hours to haze half a dozen cattle out of the canyons to the plain where the herd was being held.

Jick Spellman gave Brent the job of keeping the herd from scattering, an easy, monotonous task. Brent knew that he had probably done so because of orders from Camelia. Once again he felt an impatience with his body's weakness.

In mid-afternoon, Jick and Sleepy rode in with a small gather and put it into the main herd. Camelia had been making a rough tally, and she rode over to Jick now to compare her figures with his. They talked for a few minutes, then she rode off to the northeast. Jick came over to Brent.

"Sleepy'll take your place here," the foreman said. "I got a job for you to do."

"Sure," Brent said, eager for anything to relieve the monotony of herding. "What is it?"

"Follow Miss Edwards. I'm kind of worried about her."

Brent frowned. "Why? Where's she going?"

"Over to talk to Jake Reid. We'll have to pass through his ranch when we drive the cattle out of the valley. She's going over to tell him we'll be comin' in a couple of days."

"You don't expect him to make trouble, do you?" Brent asked.

Jick shook his head. "Not Jake Reid. But Benham might. You're pretty handy with a gun, I hear. Tag along and see that Miss Edwards don't get in no trouble. Better get started."

Brent touched spurs to the sorrel and moved across the plain at an easy gallop. The girl was still visible in the distance, a black dot following the ridge top a mile or

so away, but even as he watched she topped the crest and disappeared. He rode for several minutes without sighting her again. The country grew rougher as the plain swelled up to meet the foothills. He had intended to stay some distance behind, but as the canyons grew deep and twisting he pushed forward at a more rapid pace to close the gap between them.

As he rode around a bend in a deep cut, he suddenly came face to face with Camelia. She had halted and sat waiting for him. He reined up, feeling uncomfortable before her frown.

"Why are you following me?" she asked.

"Orders."

"Didn't Jick think I could take care of myself?"

He shrugged and did not answer. She smiled, finally, and said, "Well, as long as you've come this far, you might as well go along. A person would think Jick was my mother the way he worries over me."

They rode in silence for a while, then Brent said, "Are you about ready to start the drive?"

"We will be in a couple of days. We'll have a couple of thousand head rounded up by then. That'll be enough."

"Enough for what?"

"To meet the payment on the mortgage. The last payment, thank goodness."

"Jick mentioned a rancher named Jake Reid. Said you'd have to drive the herd across his place."

She nodded. "He owns Needle Canyon. It's the only pass to the northeast through the mountains. If we didn't use it, we'd have to go way around to the west and that would take a couple of weeks longer."

"Don't suppose Reid will make trouble?"

"He can't. We've got a written agreement with him. We give him water rights in exchange for using the pass."

They were riding up a steep, rocky slope now and the canyon in front of them seemed to end in a blank wall. Then as they drew nearer, the wall showed itself to be a right angle turn beyond which the canyon proceeded in a straight line for perhaps a hundred yards. Above it, the sheer walls rose to a height of two hundred feet and at no spot was the canyon more than seventy-five feet wide. Beyond, it widened abruptly into a broad, well grassed valley in the midst of which sat a small house and a set of ramshackle-looking outbuildings.

"Reid's place," Camelia said.

Brent nodded politely, wondering what she would say if she knew that he had chased wild mustangs in this canyon long before either Jake Reid or the cabin were there.

They found the rancher out by the corral. He was a thin-chested, seedy looking man of about forty-five with deep lines of worry around his eyes. His clothes and the dispirited way they hung on him had the the same air of poverty and failure as the cabin itself.

Camelia told him that the Lazy S would be driving the herd through Needle Canyon in a couple of days, and Brent, silently watching Reid, got the impression that the information was not news to him. Reid's face grew resentful.

"Two days ain't much notice," he said. "I got some stock over at the other end of the valley that I'll have to move. I got a quarter section of hay-land fenced in an' the fence'll have to be taken down. Don't know when I can get around to it."

Camelia frowned. "You'll have to get around to it. We can't afford to wait any longer."

"I dunno," Red said evasively. "I'll see what I can do."

As they rode away from the ranch, Camelia was silent, deep in her own thoughts. At last she said, "I can't understand it. This is the first time he ever acted like that."

"You mean this is the first time he ever lied to you?" Brent said.

She looked at him sharply. "What makes you think he was lying?"

Brent shrugged. "Just a hunch. But if you want to find out, I know an easy way to prove whether or not he was telling the truth."

"Show it to me."

They had passed through Needle Canyon by then, and abruptly Brent swung his horse up the steep slope to his left. Atop the ridge, he turned to the east and led the way along the canyon rim back toward Reid's ranch. Camelia followed him without comment for a time, then she asked, "Just where are you going?"

"To see the stock and the quarter section of hay-land Reid claims he's got in the other end of the canyon."

They rode for an hour or so, making slow progress across the broken washes and gullies. Brent hoped that the girl was too preoccupied to notice the sureness with which he threaded through the rough going.

Dusk had fallen by the time they reached the far end of the canyon. On the rim they reined up. Brent pointed at the valley. "There's your proof," he said.

Camelia nodded, scowling. Below, the floor of the valley was empty of stock. There was no fence, not even an acre of cultivated land. "So he *was* lying!" she murmured. She was silent for a moment, then her face grew firm. "Well, whether he likes it or not, we're going through. Even if we have to get Abe Jensen to back us up. Come on, let's go home."

They took a short cut across the range. The horses could not move very swiftly over the uncertain terrain and full darkness had fallen before they were out of the foothills.

They were moving single file along the bottom of a shallow wash, Camelia in the lead, when the sudden whinny of a horse nearby startled Brent. The sorrel quivered and turned his head to the right, ears keening toward the sound. It was that small movement that saved Brent's life.

He flattened out on the sorrel's neck, at the same time yelling a warning to the girl ahead. The roar of a rifle shattered the night, and an orange spout of flame blossomed blindingly on the slope above.

Cameila's horse bolted. The sorrel reared in fright. Brent rolled out of the saddle and dropped soundlessly to the ground, letting his horse follow after the girl's. He lay there unmoving, waiting for the gunman above to show himself. Holding his breath, he eased his Colt out of its holster and pulled the hammer back with a soft click.

The darkness was nearly complete, but by keeping his eyes fixed on the ridge top he could make out its dark line against the sky. If the gunman should be so foolish as to stand up, he would have him dead to rights.

There was a small movement atop the ridge. A loose rock rolled down the slope. Brent saw, or thought he saw, a blob against the sky that might be the figure of a man. Instinctively he triggered the Colt.

The gun rocked in his hand. Above, a rifle answered instantly and a slug whispered by his face so close that he imagined he felt the wind of it. He triggered the Colt again and again, raking the spot where he had seen the flash with a withering hail of lead.

When the gun was empty, the rifle no longer replied from above. Brent heard a low moan, then the soft thud of a body falling and the rattle of dislodged rocks as it tumbled down the slope. He stood up as the body came to rest in the bottom of the wash not three feet from him. He fumbled for a match.

He was bending over the silent figure, protecting the yellow flame of the match in his cupped hands when Camelia came riding up leading his sorrel. She dismounted and knelt beside him. "Are you all right?" she asked.

"I'm okay. But I'm afraid our friend here isn't."

"Friend? Who?"

The match went out and they were left kneeling there in complete darkness. "Williams," Brent said quietly. "He must have followed us, waiting for his chance."

"Is he. . . .?"

"Yeah," Brent said. "He's stone dead."

Chapter III

FIGHT WITH A GUN-DOG

THEY left the body where it had fallen, mounted and rode back to the ranch. Jick was waiting for them, worried because they had been gone so long, and immediately started bombarding them with questions. Camelia cut him off sharply.

"Have one of the boys take care of our horses and come inside. There's been trouble."

They went into the kitchen and the girl lit the lamp, then she told the foreman what had occurred. Jick shot a quick I-told-you-so look at Brent and said, "I knew something like this would happen. Benham won't stop at anything."

Camelia frowned. "Surely you don't believe he sent Williams out with orders to shoot *me?*"

Jick shrugged. "Why not? He knew that the whole range was expecting a showdown fight between Williams and Lacy, here. If anything happened to you

during that fight, it might get by as an accident. Either way, Benham himself would be in the clear."

Brent hadn't thought of that angle before, but now he admitted it was a possibility and the thought gave him further insight into the ruthlessness of the Bar Cross owner. Camelia had fixed a pot of coffee and after he had downed a couple of steaming cups he stood up and said, "Guess we ought to report this affair to the sheriff. Where can I find him this time of night?"

"You go on to bed," Jick ordered. "I'll take care of it. Abe Jensen may want to ask you a few questions later, but I don't think he'll make any trouble."

Brent hesitated a moment, then nodded wearily. "I hope you're right," he said, and went to the bunkhouse and turned in.

He got up at dawn next morning and went out with the crew. Jick said that Jensen wanted to talk to him, and in the middle of the morning the sheriff rode out and questioned him briefly. When Brent had told his story, he nodded and said, "Yeah, that fits in with what I found. Williams' rifle had been fired three times. You're lucky he didn't get you."

Brent had felt uneasy talking to Jensen, but he relaxed now as he realized that the sheriff was taking him at his face value—as a drifting cow-waddy and no more. The sheriff turned to go, then paused.

"I'll make out a statement on this affair. Next time you're in town you can sign it."

"Thanks," Brent said. "I'll do that."

The crew put in a long day and Brent was glad when it at last came to an end and they headed back to the ranch. Most of the after-effects of the fever had disappeared by now, but he was still far from himself.

He felt better after a hearty supper. He was sitting in front of the bunkhouse talking to Jick Spellman when Camelia came out. In the press of events of the night before, he had completely forgotten Jake Reid's strange actions and so had the girl, but she told Jick about them now.

"I don't know why he shouldn't want us to use the pass," she concluded, "but he evidently doesn't. There's no way he can stop us legally, of course, but I've been wondering if it might not be a good idea to get the sheriff to back us up."

Jick nodded. "Probably would. Abe would be glad to do it, too. I'll ride in and talk to him."

Brent knew that the foreman had been up most of the night before. "Why don't you let me go instead?" he volunteered. "Jensen's got a statement he wants me to sign. Might as well do it tonight."

"Do you feel up to it?" Camelia asked understandingly.

"Sure. I feel fine."

She nodded. "All right. You'll probably find him at home. He lives next door to the jail. Explain how things are. Tell him we're starting about noon tomorrow."

Brent saddled up and headed down the trail toward Lost Valley. A thin silver crescent of a moon hung in the western sky, shedding scant light but giving him the pleasant feeling of having company as he jogged along. For the first time in a long while, he felt contented. His mind drifted back across the years and he smiled as he thought of the headstrong, restless youngster who had once ridden this same trail. It was good to be back in the valley, good to be a part of the ranch that had once been his home. He did not let his mind dwell on the thought that soon he would have to be riding on. Tonight, the present was enough.

When he reached town, he found Abe Jensen sitting on the front porch of his modest home, quietly smoking in the darkness. They talked for a while, then Jensen took him to the jail next door, lit the lamp in the office and had him sign the statement which had been prepared. Brent delivered Camelia's message then, and the sheriff said he'd be glad to come.

"Jake Reid's got no call to make trouble," he declared. "The Lazy S has always treated him right. I can't figure what's got into him lately."

Brent thanked Jensen and was starting to leave when the sheriff said, "For a stranger, Lacy, you sure have a knack for gettin' into trouble. Harvey Benham seems to think I ought to throw you in jail just on general principles."

Brent stiffened. "Has Benham been talking to you?"

"Yeah. He dropped in this afternoon."

"What'd you tell him?"

A slow, tired smile creased the sheriff's leathery face. He shook his head. "The

Bar Cross don't own me. Not yet, anyhow. See you tomorrow, Lacy."

"Sure," Brent said, and left the jail.

He wondered, as he rode upstreet, just what it was that Jensen had been trying to tell him. He knew that the sheriff always played a straight game; but he knew, too, that there were ways in which a man like Benham could bring pressure to bear on the most honest of men. He wondered if Benham were holding a club of some sort over Jensen's head.

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THE HAPPY Time Saloon was still open and Brent tied his horse at the rail and went inside. The place was more alive tonight than it had been that first afternoon. A dozen or so cowboys were scattered around the room, playing cards and drinking. Two men stood at the bar dawdling over glasses of beer.

Mike Donahough was working behind the bar and when he saw Brent he came over and asked, "What'll it be?"

"Whiskey," Brent said.

The two men at the bar broke off their conversation suddenly, then one nudged the other and they picked up their glasses and walked to a table on the other side of the room. The saloon had grown perceptibly quieter. In the mirror, Brent could see a dozen pairs of eyes studying him.

Donahough set out the drink and Brent noticed that his face was a studied, emotionless mask. Brent gave him a coin and smiled. "Remember me?" he said.

The bartender nodded. "Sure. How are you?"

"I felt fine till I came in here." He gestured with a shoulder toward the room in general. "What's the matter with them, do they think I'm a leper?"

Donahough picked up a glass and polished it stolidly. "They got nothing against you. It's just that none of 'em want to buck Harvey Benham."

"And I suppose you feel that way, too?"

A dull red spread across Donahough's florid face. He put the glass down with a sharp clink. "Benham nor nobody else can buffalo Mike Donahough! But I mind my own business, that's all."

Still smiling, Brent shrugged and tossed off the drink. Donahough kept looking at him, and finally leaned closer and said, "I like your guts, Lacy. That's why I'll tell you what nobody else has got the nerve to tell you—that the whole valley is glad you did what you did.

"I'll stick my neck out an' tell you something else. Benham has let it be known that he's going to get you. He ain't a man to go back on his word."

"So I've heard," Brent said quietly.

"He's in town tonight. He'll come in here for a drink about ten, like he always does. Now, it's none of my business, but if I was you I'd be gone when he gets here."

Brent looked at the clock on the wall. It was a quarter till ten now. He sighed. "I wished you hadn't told me that," he said.

Donahough scowled. "For cripe's sake, why?"

"Because I'd intended to leave as soon as I finished my drink. Now I'll have to wait."

Donahough stared at him for several moments, then with a baffled expression on his face turned away and went back to his work. Brent gazed steadily at the clock for a full minute. Deliberately, then, he forced his eyes away and did not look at it again.

He could feel the muscles along the back of his neck tightening, and with that cool, detached part of his brain which always took control of his body at times such as this wondered if the prickling sensation along his spine were not caused by some old, half-forgotten instinct similar to that which made the hackles rise along an animal's back.

Three of the more timid hangers-on arose from their tables and left the saloon. The rest stayed, waiting, watching him, held there by curiosity, Brent supposed.

He could hear the clock ticking steadily. The palms of his hands grew moist with nervous sweat. He wiped them on the hips of his denims. The clock ticked on.

Harvey Benham was on time almost to the minute. Even before he saw the Bar Cross owner, Brent knew of his arrival by the absolute quiet which fell in the saloon. Moving away from the bar a pace, he turned to face the door.

"Hello, Benham," he said.

Benham stood just inside the batwings, his hands hanging loosely down at his sides, his cool eyes regarding Brent without pas-

sion. Brent had never seen a man with such an iron control over himself and his emotions.

"Williams told you to leave the valley," Benham said quietly. "You didn't go."

"I wasn't ready to go," Brent answered.

"Suppose *I* tell you to leave?"

"It's your breath. You can waste it if you want to."

Benham's facial expression did not change. Brent kept watching him, waiting. Some instinct told him now that Benham would not draw his gun. The premonition proved true. Slowly Benham moved his left hand to the buckle of his gunbelt, unfastened it. It dropped to the floor with a dull, hollow thud.

In the silence, Brent heard a small sound, as if someone had sucked in his breath sharply. The glove had been slapped across his face. Benham had given the dare, and he must take it or let it lie in this next moment.

"If that's the way you want it," he murmured, and with a deft movement shucked off his own gunbelt.

It had barely touched the floor when Benham came charging in, head lowered, big fists flailing. Brent caught him on the cheek with a sharp left and crossed with a crisp right. The big man merely grunted and shook the blows off. Brent gave ground.

There was no science in the way Benham fought, but from the first Brent knew he was no match for him. Benham had a rugged vitality, a quickness on his feet and a rubber-like ability to absorb punishment that was amazing. He took three blows to give one, and every time he landed it took something out of Brent.

He was growing weaker now. A solid right landed on his shoulder and sent him reeling back against a table. He regained his balance and clipped Benham hard under the left eye. Blood started flowing from a break in the skin. Benham brushed it away with the back of a hand, laughed, and came boring in again.

Brent's head was reeling. A mist was forming in front of his eyes and a constant dull roar echoed against his eardrums. It was the old weakness, he knew, as much as it was the punishment he was taking. He caught his breath harshly. If only he could have held out another two minutes!

He could see Benham only dimly now. His arms were very heavy. He tried futilely to lift them and swing. He saw Benham grin in derision. Something smashed into his face; a terrible blow to his stomach made him feel suddenly nauseated. The mist closed in.

A numbness had enveloped his brain now so that it was incapable of concentrated thought. He fell several times and was dimly conscious of forcing himself to his feet, of Benham's grinning face, of the terrible fists that kept pounding, pounding.

Then he was stretched out face downward on the floor trying to force himself up. He cursed because his muscles would not answer the small portion of his brain which was still alive. Numbly, he felt Benham picking him up, hitting his face again and again. Then a voice which he recognized as Mike Donahough's penetrated the fog.

"That's enough, I tell you—leave him alone—I won't stand for no more, you hear me?"

Benham let go of him and he fell into a heap on the floor, still fighting the nauseating blackness. He knew that Benham was leaning over him, speaking, but he caught only a word here and there.

". . . .get out. . . .worse next time. . . . get out. . . ."

Then the unbearable nausea overwhelmed him and he was swept off into a sea of spinning darkness and heard no more

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MIKE Donahough said, "Here, drink this. It'll make you feel better."

Brent swallowed the liquid and sat up, coughing. He and Donahough were alone in the saloon. The inner door had been closed and locked and he was resting on the floor with his shoulders propped up against the base of the bar. His head throbbed painfully with every beat of his heart. One eye was swollen shut and the movement of breathing hurt his chest.

Donahough helped him to his feet. "Can you make it?"

Brent nodded. "I'm all right now."

"You sure put up a fight. The whole town's talkin' about it."

Brent tried to smile but the movement

hurt his face too much so he compromised with a shrug. "You mean it's talking about how I got whipped?"

Donahough shook his head slowly. "Funny thing about that," he said. "Sometimes it ain't whether a man gets the hell knocked out of him or not. It's the way he takes it. That's what the town's talkin' about, Lacy."

Brent's gunbelt was lying on the floor nearby and he stooped and picked it up. He buckled it on without speaking. He felt Donahough's eyes upon him and turned and looked at him.

"Thanks for giving me a hand. Hope it doesn't get you in trouble."

"It won't. Benham knows better than to mess with me. I got a sawed-off shotgun lyin' under the bar. People say that only a yellow dog would use a shotgun on a man; maybe that's so, but Benham knows I'd use it on him if it come to a showdown. He'll leave me alone."

Brent picked up his hat and started toward the door. Donahough unlocked it, but before he swung it open he looked at Brent searchingly for a long moment.

"Well?" Brent said.

"I ain't goin' to tell you to get out of the valley," Donahough mumbled, "because I know you wouldn't go. But I just want you to know that—well, what I mean is—you be careful."

Brent grinned, then winced. "I'll try, Mike. Adios."

He stumbled out the door, painfully climbed aboard his horse and rode away. Mike Donahough stood in the doorway for a long time, staring after him down the dark street.

Chapter IV

BULLETS AND BARB-WIRE

IT TOOK a gigantic effort for Brent to force himself out of bed next morning. His left eye was swollen so badly that he could see through only a narrow slit. His lips were puffed out twice their normal size. His let hand was so stiff that he could not close it.

Slipping out of the bunkhouse before the others awoke, he went to the pump and bathed his tender face in cold water for several minutes. It made him feel better but he knew it didn't improve his looks any. As he was drying his face with a towel, Montana and Bat came out of the bunkhouse. They brought up short when they saw him.

"Lord!" Montana exclaimed. "What'd you tangle with—a buzz saw?"

"Looks like you stopped a stampede," Bat declared. "How many men got killed?"

Brent did not smile. "I fell off my horse," he said.

Montana looked at him steadily, then shrugged and stuck his head under the pump. "Yeah," he grunted sarcastically, "an' your hoss kicked you in the mouth, planted a knee in your eye, an' stepped on your hand. Sure it wasn't a nightmare 'stead of a hoss?"

Brent walked away without answering. He was in no mood to joke this morning. The boys at the Lazy S would discover what had happened soon enough. They would learn that he had been whipped badly by a man who held him in so much contempt that he had not even bothered to use a gun.

A steady, grim flame of hate burned in him now. The die was cast. Next time he met Benham they would settle the debt once and for all, and this time death would be the loser's end of the pot.

After breakfast, Jick sent Montana, Bat, and Hargis out to relieve Sleepy and Mac, who were guarding the herd. Camelia came out to talk to the foreman, and when she saw Brent she looked at him curiously but did not question him. He knew that she had probably already guessed what had happened.

"Did you see Abe Jensen?" she asked.

"Yeah," he answered. "He said he'd be here by ten or eleven o'clock. He said Reid couldn't stop us."

She nodded in satisfaction.

A rider came galloping down the trail from the east, and they turned and watched him approach. Jick scowled. "It's one of the Bar Cross boys," he said.

The cowboy rode into the yard and reined up. There was a contemptuous smile on his lips as he looked down at Brent. "Steer fall on you?" he asked solicitously.

Brent did not answer. Camelia said, "What do you want?"

The cowboy reached into a shirt pocket, took out a folded piece of paper and handed

it to her. Frowning, she opened it and read the note. Brent saw her face suddenly grow white, then without a word she handed the note to him. He read the penciled scrawl swiftly.

Dear Miss Edwards:
I guess you won't think much of me when you get this, but there ain't nothing else I can do. Benham's had me over a barrel for a long time. I got my wife and family to take care of and I just ain't got the stomach to fight any longer.
Benham offered me a good cash price for my land and cattle, so I sold out to him, lock, stock and barrel. I guess this'll leave you in a hole, but like I said I got my wife and kids to think of. I'm leaving the valley right away.
Yours respectfully,
Jake Reid

Brent took a deep, harsh breath. Camelia was silent, as if stunned by the suddenness of the blow. Jick, too, seemed unable to say anything. Brent looked up at the Bar Cross cowboy.

"Give us the rest of it," he snapped.

The cowboy stuck the cigarette he had been rolling in his mouth, lit it, and said leisurely, "Benham says to tell you he don't need water rights from the Lazy S. So the agreement about Needle Canyon is no good any more. He says if you still want to drive the herd out of the valley, you can take the long way round."

The cowboy grinned openly then, and took a long pull at the cigarette. Turning away, he threw over a shoulder, "Benham says to tell you that he's real sorry about this."

A hoarse, hate-filled sound rose in Jick's throat and he moved forward impulsively toward the Bar Cross rider. Brent laid a restraining hand on his arm. "Let him go, Jick. He's not the man we want."

The cowboy headed out of the yard and back toward town. Brent looked at Camelia. All the spirit seemed to have drained out of her. "Well," she said listlessly, "that's that. We're licked."

"No we're not," Brent burst out. "Benham nor nobody else can keep you from using Needle Canyon."

She frowned. "What are you talking about?"

"That pass never belonged to Reid," Brent answered doggedly. "Whether he used Lazy S water or not, Needle Canyon can't be closed. It's in the deed, I know it."

"Deed?"

Brent nodded. "Jake Reid bought his ranch from your father fifteen years ago. The deed stated specifically that Needle Canyon could never be closed. Reid could build his cabin there if he wanted to, but he couldn't close the canyon. That deed was destroyed when the old courthouse in Lost Valley burned about twelve years ago."

Camelia looked at him searchingly. "You sound like you know what you're talking about. Reid did buy his place from my father and his partner. The court house did burn twelve years ago. But how do you know those things?"

Brent shrugged and looked away. "I've been doing some investigating," he mumbled. "If you don't believe me, ask Felipe. He remembers."

The girl kept looking at him, then at last she shook her head slowly. "No, we'll take your word for it. What do you think we ought to do?"

"Wait for Abe Jensen to show up. Benham won't buck him."

The girl nodded. "All right, we'll wait. And I hope you're right about Benham."

The morning passed quickly. Eleven o'clock came and Abe Jensen had not showed up. Noon came and still he did not put in his appearance. Jick was growing impatient, and finally said, "Sure you told him we wanted to get started at noon?"

" 'Course I'm sure," Brent snapped. "I can't figure what's happened to him. He said he'd be here by eleven at the latest."

He kept it to himself, but he, too, was puzzled at the sheriff's absence. He thought again of what Jensen had said the night before and wondered if, as he had suspected then, Benham had some ace in the hole with which he could keep Jensen away.

Shortly after one o'clock, Montana rode in from the herd. His face was grim. "I took a sashay over to Needle Canyon, figurin' maybe you was havin' trouble with Reid," he said. "He ain't there any more."

Jick told him they knew that.

"An' that ain't the worst of it," Montana continued. "Benham has threw a five-wire fence across the far end of the canyon. Fact is, it's three fences, one behind another. He's got half a dozen gunmen camped there, guarding it."

Brent's mind worked swiftly. The fact that Benham had fenced the canyon and placed gunmen there to guard it meant that he knew he had no legal right to prevent the Lazy S cattle from going through. It meant, too, that he knew Abe Jensen would not appear to back up the Lazy S crew.

His mind's eye pictured the layout of the narrow, steep-walled canyon. It would be physically impossible to force the cattle through that barbed wire. If the Lazy S crew tried to tear the fence down, they would be at the mercy of the guns of the Bar Cross guards, who could barricade themselves in secure positions among the boulders beyond the narrow exit of the canyon. In their position, they could hold off an army.

Suddenly a chill ran up his spine and he gripped Jick by the shoulder. "We *can* get through that canyon!" he exclaimed. "We can hit 'em so hard and fast they'll never know what happened."

Jick looked at him as if he had gone suddenly insane. "How?" he asked.

"Got any dynamite?"

"Yeah," Jick said. "There's a few sticks around here someplace."

"How about caps and a short piece of fuse?"

"We can scrape those up, too. What's on your mind?"

Brent quickly explained his scheme, and when he had finished both Montana and Jick nodded and admitted it might work. "But they'll see what we're up to," Jick said. "You can't move two thousand head of cattle without raisin' a dust."

"We'll wait till dark," Brent answered. "Tell the boys to hold the herd right where it is until the sun goes down. Then they can start drifting it east, easy-like. There'll be a piece of a moon tonight, just enough to let us see what we're doing."

"What if the Bar Cross boys put up a fight?"

"We'll have to risk that. If everything goes right, the herd will be through the canyon before they know what's happened."

A gleam of unholy joy showed in Montana's eyes as he swung back into the saddle. "Wait'll I tell the boys," he muttered. "They're goin' to like this."

Brent smiled grimly. He had a notion he was going to enjoy it, too.

AS DUSK fell, Brent and Camelia Edwards left the ranch and rode to the northeast across the Lazy S range. Brent carried the dynamite bomb cradled carefully in his right arm, and was extremely cautious about letting it jolt around. He had tied half a dozen sticks together, capped them, and fastened on a short length of fuse, preferring to take the risk of carrying the explosive rather than chance making a poor job of wrapping the bomb after reaching the canyon.

He had not wanted Camelia to come along, but as soon as she discovered what was afoot she would not be left behind. Jick had gone to the herd and would start drifting it toward the canyon shortly after dark. Three hours should suffice for the herd to reach Needle Canyon, Brent calculated. By then, the Bar Cross hands would probably have relaxed their vigilance —or so he hoped.

The silver disc of the moon in its first quarter hung nearly straight above when they reached a spot a quarter of a mile south of the canyon. Brent reined up and gestured at the arroyo below.

"You wait here. Jick will bring the herd into the canyon mouth, then stampede 'em as soon as they make the turn. Fire two shots just before the lead reaches the turn. That'll be my signal to toss the dynamite."

The girl nodded. In the moonlight, Brent could see the tenseness of her face, and in that fleeting moment as he turned away, his mind flashed back to a day so long ago when she had stood outside the corral and watched him swing aboard the spotted pony.

"Don't take any chances," she called after him softly.

He stayed well back from the canyon rim until he came to the spot where Montana had said the fence was located. Dismounting there, he crept forward on foot until he reached the edge, then stretched out full length on his stomach and stared downward.

Faintly visible in the moonlight, the canyon floor lay two hundred feet below. At first he could not see the fence. then his eyes caught the glitter of moonlight on new wire and he traced the dark lines of the barrier across the narrow canyon exit.

No guards were visible near the fence itself, but fifty yards to the east a fire pinpointed the darkness. Watching, he could

make out indistinguishable forms of men sitting around it and hear the low murmur of voices. He wondered briefly if Benham was among them.

Rolling over on his side, he fumbled in his pocket for a match with his stiff left hand, wincing as pain shot through it. Then he moved quietly behind a sheltering boulder and lay there, waiting.

An hour passed, during which no sound came to his straining ears except that of the night wind sobbing faintly up from the valley. Then he heard it—a faraway rumble of movement, a low bawling of disgruntled steers. He grew tense, wondering if those below would hear it, too.

Suddenly two shots blasted the stillness of the night. A shout of alarm rose from the fence was down. He knew that some of the cattle would be killed in the terrific press, but that could not be helped. If only they did not pile up on the fence!

The first wave of the herd crossed the spot where the fence had been without so much as slowing up. He breathed a long, swift sigh of relief. The dynamite had done its work.

He turned away from the canyon rim and went back to where his horse was waiting. Camelia came galloping up, shouting to make herself heard above the constant roar welling out of the canyon.

"They're going through!"

He nodded, and smiled grimly in the darkness. "Yeah, we were lucky."

"How about the Bar Cross men?"

Our boys are giving us the power of their two strong arms, their battle-trained minds, and the courage of their fighting hearts. But they need bullets, guns, bombs, planes and tanks to make a real fight against Hitler's and Hirohito's regimented murderers! War Bonds and Stamps will help supply them! BUY A BOND EVERY PAY-DAY!

the camp below. Quickly he lighted the match and held it to the short fuse. It caught and burned in a shower of sparks, emitting a low, hissing noise.

The canyon echoed with sound now. The Bar Cross men were running for nearby horses. At the far end of the canyon, an ever increasing sound rumbled. The fuse was almost gone. Brent stood up, and bringing his right arm far back, threw the unwieldy bundle of dynamite sticks toward the center of the dark abyss.

Muttering a desperate prayer that his aim had been accurate, he dropped flat on his face. He lay there for age-like seconds, then a violent eruption shook the ground beneath him as if it were so much jelly. The sound of the explosion welled up out of the canyon with ear-splitting intensity, making his skin tingle for seconds afterward.

He stood up just in time to see the panic-stricken cattle round the sharp turn at the far end of the canyon. They were massed tightly together in the limited space, and from above it looked as if the canyon floor itself had come alive and was moving forward irresistibly.

It was impossible to tell how much of

"Don't think they'll bother us. Nothing can stop those cattle now and they know it."

Together, he and the girl circled down the easier slope to the east, then paused near the canyon floor and watched the running cattle stream by. When the last of them had passed, Jick, who was tailing the herd, turned it over to the men and came riding over to where they sat. His face was creased with a wide smile.

"We're on our way," he said. "We'll be through the pass and well out of the valley come sunup."

Brent nodded, and swung his horse around to follow the herd. "Guess I better be ridin' if I'm going to catch up with the rest of the boys."

Jick suddenly put out a hand and stopped him. He shook his head firmly. "You're stayin' at the ranch. Me and the boys can make out, but we wouldn't feel easy if we knew Miss Edwards was back here alone."

The girl frowned and made an impatient gesture with a hand. "I can take care of myself. Besides, Felipe will be there."

"He's too old and crippled to be much

help," Jick said stubbornly. "No use arguin'—Lacy is staying here."

The foreman turned away then, waved a hand to them, and galloped after the herd. Camelia watched him go, a tender light in her eyes. She turned to Brent, finally, smiled and said, "It looks like you've been appointed my guardian. Let's go back to the ranch."

It was past midnight when they reached the Lasy S. The moon lay far down on the western horizon now, shedding a weird orange glow over the land. Brent and the girl dismounted at the rear of the ranch house, then he led both horses toward the barn to unsaddle them while she went into the house.

As he was fumbling with the corral gate, a sudden shrill scream reached his ears, chilling him like a plunge into icy water. He dropped the horses' reins and ran to the house. Camelia was standing near the steps, trembling.

"What's wrong?" he demanded.

"A man!" she whispered. "He's lying there on the steps. . . . I think he's dead!"

Kneeling in the shadow, Brent's groping hand touched a denim clad leg. He found a match, struck it. In its pale, flickering glow he saw the figure of a man sprawled out face downward on the steps, as if he had collapsed there while attempting to climb them.

Horror struck him suddenly dumb. The man was Abe Jensen.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Pay-Off

"IS HE dead?" Camelia asked in a hoarse whisper.

"Don't think so," Brent said. "Go wake up Felipe—we'll need him. I'll carry him into the house."

Placing his arms under the unconscious sheriff, he carried him into the house, feeling his way carefully across the dark kitchen to the bedroom. He put Jensen down on the bed and lit a lamp. He was bending over the officer, cutting away his blood soaked shirt, when Camelia and Felipe came into the room.

"Heat some water," he said over a shoulder. "Get clean cloths for bandages."

Felipe went into the kitchen to build a fire. Camelia, her face ash-gray in the lamp glow, stood in the doorway watching Brent. "How is he?" she said finally.

Brent shook his head. "Got a nasty hole through the shoulder and a bad gash on his head. He's lost a lot of blood."

When the water had heated, Felipe brought it in. Camelia took charge of dressing the sheriff's wounds. Brent watched her work, his mind grimly reconstructing what must have happened. This was what Abe Jensen meant last night when he said that the Bar Cross didn't own him yet. He had known that Benham would not hesitate to murder an officer of the law if he stood in his way. Yet, knowing that, he had ridden out of Lost Valley this morning and headed for the Lazy S to keep his promise.

Benham, or some of his men, had ambushed him, then left him wounded and bleeding there on the trail. When or where it had happened, Brent had no way of knowing. If Jensen died, Brent thought bleakly, no one would ever know what had occurred.

Camelia arose from the bedside and rubbed a tired hand across her temples. "That's all we can do now," she said.

"You better get some rest," Brent told her. She shook her head. "I'll be all right."

He sat with her there by the bedside while the remaining hours of the night ticked slowly away. From time to time, he dozed, awakening from each short nap with a guilty start, but completely unable to fight down the weariness which crept into his blood like a drug.

The grayness of approaching dawn dimmed the light of the lamp. Abe Jensen stirred slightly then once more grew quiet. Camelia leaned forward and put the back of her hand against his face. "There's no fever," she said with relief. "I think he'll pull through."

"Is there a doctor in Lost Valley?" Brent asked.

She nodded. "Yes. Doctor McBride."

"If you can make out all right now, I'll go get him."

Gulping down a cup of coffee which Felipe had prepared, Brent saddled a fresh horse and rode to town. He found the doctor without difficulty and sent him on his way to the Lazy S. Full day had come by now and the places of business along the street were opening up. He suddenly

realized that he was wolfishly hungry and went to a cafe and ordered a double portion of ham and eggs.

There were half a dozen other early risers sitting along the long row of wooden stools, all of whom were strangers to him. As he ate, they looked at him curiously, but there was a friendliness in their curiosity this morning that had been absent the night he had fought with Benham in the saloon. When he happened to catch their eyes, they smiled and gave short nods of approval. One man slapped him on the back and said he was glad to see that somebody in Lost Valley had guts.

At first, Brent did not understand the change in the attitude, then he realized that news of what had happened in Needle Canyon last night had already circulated about. The valley knew that Benham had been beaten at his own game. They were laughing at him—laughing at a man they had once feared. Brent wondered how Benham would take it when he heard that laughter.

He finished his meal and stood up and dropped a coin on the counter. The cafe proprietor pushed it back at him. "This is on me," he said.

Brent looked at him steadily for a moment, then shrugged and pocketed the coin and left the cafe.

Doctor McBride was getting into his buggy to start back to town when Brent rode into the Lasy S yard. "How's Jensen, Doc?" he asked.

"He'll be all right," the doctor answered. "Rest and good care will patch him up."

Brent turned his horse into the corral and went into the house. The sheriff was conscious now and smiled faintly when he saw Brent.

"Sorry I wasn't on hand like I promised," he said.

Brent shook his head. "We managed all right. You had a close call. Got any idea who did it?"

"Didn't get a good look at the hombre's face, but he was ridin' a Bar Cross horse."

"Where'd it happen?"

" 'Bout five miles down the trail. My horse spooked and threw me. I don't remember much about how I got here. Crawled, I reckon."

Brent saw that he wasn't needed here. His eyes were heavy for sleep and he could no longer fight off the weariness of his body. Camelia had already gone to her room to rest, and after making Felipe promise that he would call him if he should be needed, Brent went to the bunkhouse and stretched out without even bothering to pull off his boots and fell asleep immediately.

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THE afternoon sun was slanting in through a west window when he awakened. He felt groggy from sleeping in the unaccustomed heat and got up and went out to the pump and ran cold water over his head. Fully awake now, he was walking toward the house when he met Felipe fumbling his careful way down the back steps.

Felipe's sightless eyes turned toward him. He said, "Señor?"

"Yes?"

Felipe held out a piece of white paper. "This note came for you."

"Who brought it?"

"He would not give his name, but his voice was harsh and thick and he rode a tall horse with a light gait."

Brent scanned the note. It contained only one line: "I'll be in Lost Valley at six this afternoon. Benham."

So the showdown had come, Brent thought grimly. Slowly, he tore the paper into small pieces. "Did you show this to anyone?" he asked Felipe.

"No, señor. It was for you."

"Did Camelia see the rider that brought it?"

"I do not think so. She has been asleep until only a few minutes ago."

Brent nodded in satisfaction. "Then you must say nothing about it to anyone."

He turned, then, and went into the bunkhouse. Sitting down on the edge of the bunk, he slowly built a cigarette. Felipe came in and sat down in a chair on the other side of the room. Seeming to feel with the sensitiveness of the blind that Brent wished to be alone with his thoughts, he kept his peace.

This is Benham's last card, Brent mused. A last bid in an all-or-nothing game. Somehow it was natural that Benham should play it this way. It fitted his nature. Lost Valley was laughing at him now and he could not abide laughter. There remained

but one course by which he could still that laughter—and he had chosen it, chosen to fight it out with a man whom he had once whipped and whom his confidence told him he could whip again in a more deadly game.

Brent took a last deep drag at the cigarette, stood up and ground it under his heel. He dug out his war-bag and tossed his few possessions into it. When it was packed, he straightened up and took a long quiet breath, letting his eyes run hungrily over the room, memorizing the scene as one does when he knows he is leaving a place to which he will never return.

He shook his head with vague irritation. Stooping, he picked up his war-bag. Felipe said softly, "You are going away, señor?"

Brent straightened and looked long and hard at the aged wrangler, wondering how he knew. "Yes," he said at last, "I'm going away."

"You will come back?"

"No."

"But this is your home, señor."

Brent shook his head. "Not any more. Once, a long time ago, it was. But I wasn't satisfied. I wanted something and didn't know what. I thought I could find it outside the valley and went to look for it."

"And found that you had left it here," Felipe finished quietly. "The young are always like that—they must always ride out and see how big the world is before they are satisfied with their own small piece of it. You belong here."

Brent could find no words with which to argue with the old Mexican so he did not try. He knew he must move on. He had ridden out of the valley of his own free will ten years ago and by that act had renounced all claim he might have to the Lazy S. It had treated him well. Now the time had come for him to repay the old debt, and then be riding on.

Picking up his war-bag, he walked over to Felipe and laid a gentle hand on his shoulder. "I won't be seeing you again," he said huskily. "The note you gave me was from Benham. I'm meeting him in town this afternoon. Whichever way it turns out, I won't be coming back here."

"But the señorita. . . ."

"Say nothing to her until tomorrow. Then you can tell her that. . . ." Brent broke off for a moment, groped for words. "Tell her I said adios," he finished softly, then turned and walked slowly toward the door.

Felipe sat staring patiently into the eternal blackness which surrounded his sightless eyes. "Ride with God, señor," he murmured. "Ride with God."

Taking a circuitious route around the house, Brent struck the trail to Lost Valley a mile east and rode toward town at a steady jog-trot. There was a satisfying feeling of peace in him now, a peace that comes when a man's bridges are burned behind and the course ahead is set unalterably.

He drew his Colt from its holster, checked it carefully, then replaced it. He looked up at the sun. It hung high in the western sky. He would reach town ahead of time, he knew, but that was the way he wanted it. It would permit him to choose his own spot and force Benham to take the initiative of coming to him.

Ahead, he saw dust rolling up, as if from a hard-ridden horse. It was moving down the trail toward him and because he had no wish to meet anyone now he swung the sorrel off to the right and dismounted in a shallow draw where he would not be seen.

He waited patiently while the approaching rider drew nearer. Lying in the tall grass at the head of the draw, he looked out as the man rode past and was surprised to see that it was the bartender Mike Donahough. He was riding a fat, ungainly mare and pushing her along at top speed; both horse and rider were puffing.

When they had passed, Brent swung the sorrel back onto the trail and continued toward town. He couldn't help smiling at the ludicrous figure Donahough had made.

It was shortly after five o'clock when he reached the upper end of Main Street. He pulled the sorrel down to a slow walk. The street was nearly deserted now, dozing there in the stillness of the late afternoon heat. As he moved along, Brent felt a strange familiarity about the scene, as if he were acting a role he had played before, long ago.

A man was sitting in the shade of the livery stable, whittling, and he gave Brent a swift glance and a brief nod, then dropped his eyes to the piece of wood in his hands. Ahead, a denim clad figure stood on the porch of the general store, shaded his eyes to stare downstreet for a moment, then turned and went inside.

A curious sardonic smiled played on Brent's lips. They're waiting, he thought. They're waiting for the play to begin. They're watching from behind those curtained windows and open doorways—watching and wondering.

He rode the full length of the street at a slow walk. A tall cottonwood stood just at the edge of town, and he dismounted there and tied the sorrel in the shade. Then he sat down, back to the tree and face turned so that his eyes could cover the entire length of Main Street, and rolled a cigarette.

He felt that his entire life had been leading up to this moment, focusing down to a single point in which all that had been and all that might yet be would fuse in a single intense flame. He was no stranger to fear, yet he felt free from it now. There was a curious coldness in the palms of his hands, a steady pounding of blood in his temples, a quivering of the small nerves between his shoulder blades.

He smoked a cigarette every fifteen minutes as he waited there, then when the fourth one had burned down to his fingers he arose, dropped it to the ground and worked it onto the dust with the sole of a boot. No one was visible along the length of the street now but he knew Benham would not be late for this appointment. Too much depended upon it.

Shifting the holster slightly on his right hip, he started slowly downstreet, his steps falling into an inexorable, marked rhythm. He wondered why Benham did not appear.

Then, down at the far end of the street, he saw him. Benham was moving forward slowly, arms swinging loosely at his sides, steps sure and firm, matching Brent's stride for stride.

They would meet in front of the Happy Time Saloon, Brent saw, and grimly applauded Benham's timing. Most of the town would be watching from the saloon and the buildings which flanked it. The play was just the sort of thing that Benham would want.

The Bar Cross owner was only thirty yards away now, and though his face was in the shadow, Brent could see the confident, almost contemptuous light in his eyes. Here was a man whom he had beaten

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10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

once before, Benham would reason; therefore, he would do it again.

Benham halted now and stood with feet spread wide, watching Brent. Brent did not break his stride. He kept moving forward steadily, head lifted a little as if his eyes were fixed not on Benham but on the peaks of the blue mountains which rimmed the valley. A great peace was in him now. The valley had been his home. It had given him more than he could ever give back. Now, whether he lived or died, he intended to rid the valley of the man who had destroyed its peace.

"Lacy!" Benham snapped.

Giving no sign that he heard the warning, Brent kept on walking. Words were no good any more; nothing counted but settling matters once and for all.

They were a scant twenty-five feet apart now; at that range it would be nearly impossible to miss. Benham knew it. For the first time, a flicker of uncertainty came into his eyes. He had no taste for a fight at such close quarters.

He stood irresolute for a moment, then as Brent kept moving forward, involuntarily fell back a pace. Brent smiled jeeringly, and kept walking.

An uncontrollable rush of anger came to Benham then, and his hand reached downward. Brent's own hand moved with it. The two guns came up at almost exactly the same time, roared at the same instant.

But there was a small difference. Anger, fear, uncertainty, were aiming Benham's gun; Brent's was controlled by a sure, inexorable purpose. Life and death hung on that fragile balance.

A silence in which even the wind seemed hushed held for a long second. Then Benham swayed, clutched at his breast with a groping hand, and pitched face forward into the dust. His outflung fingers nearly touched the tips of Brent's boots.

Brent stared down at the still figure for a long time, then slowly holstered his gun. It was over.

Turning away, he brushed the back of a hand across his eyes. There was an emptiness in him now, a dull gray void into which the future stretched endlessly. The feeling would pass in time, he knew, but just now it was a poignant, throbbing knife which cut into his heart. He wondered, in that moment, if he would ever know peace.

The street was coming alive now. Men were shouting, calling his name up and down the way, running along the boardwalk toward him. He did not look back.

Then suddenly a voice called, *"Curly!"*

He stopped stock-still, paralyzed, as if the years had abruptly rolled back to a forgotten past. Turning, he saw Camelia running toward him.

She drew near, stopped, and stood looking at him as if he had just come home from a long journey. "Are you all right? Are you hurt?"

He shook his head. "You saw it?"

She nodded. "Mike Donahough rode out and told me. He wanted to stop it but I knew you wouldn't let us. So we hurried to town and watched from a store."

"How did you learn who I was? Did Felipe tell you?"

"No. It was Mike."

"Mike! But how. . . ?"

"The night you fought with Benham in the saloon you talked while you were still unconscious. You said some things that got Mike to wondering."

Brent scowled. "What kind of things?"

"Something about a little girl and a spotted pony. You kept asking him what had happened to the spotted pony." She paused, then said softly. "Mike didn't remember the pony but he did remember the girl. And she remembered a big, kind-hearted boy by the name of Curly Calvin."

Brent stared down at his boot tips and could find no words. Camelia said, "Why didn't you tell me?"

He shrugged. "I had no right to be here. I gave that up when my uncle died and I rode out of the valley. The Lazy S belonged to you and your father then."

"You're wrong there. Your uncle willed his half of the ranch to my father, to be held until you came of age. It's still waiting for you. In fact—" Camelia's eyes suddenly twinkled—"you might say that according to law I'm your legal guardian."

Brent's scowl deepened, then slowly he raised his eyes and looked at her. Without saying a word, he took her in his arms.

After a while, he said, "Camelia."

"Yes?" she whispered.

"What ever did become of that spotted pony?"

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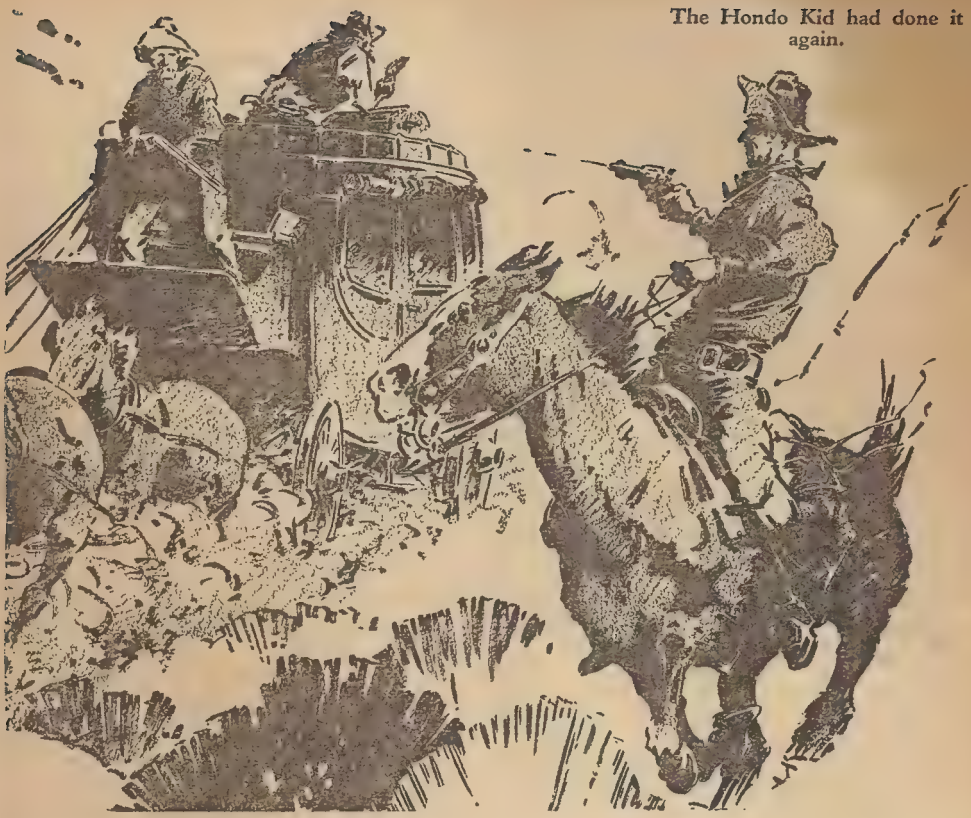

The Hondo Kid had done it again.

FRIEND OF THE HONDO KID

By DAVID X. MANNERS

After the Hondo Kid beat his best friend within an inch of his life, robbed the stage, and shot down honest ranchers, why should old Jim Palmer bust that blood-hungry killer from the jusgado, stand guard over his hideout—then get him the best damn' job he knew of?

THROUGH the window of the stage-station bunk-shack, Jim Palmer watched the long line of possemen melt into the distant horizon. Jim's old, gray-stubbled face suddenly twisted, and he could no longer restrain his bitterness.

"Damn it!" he swore feelingly. "Why do I have to be tied down here like this?" He walked irritably to the bunk-shack's door. Why couldn't he leave now, ride out with that posse?

Jim Palmer ran gnarled fingers through his silvered hair. He had been alone at the Red Mesa station of the Midvale stage line ever since his partner, Cal Loftus, had been killed by a mountain cat back in the hills.

It wasn't too much work for one man—rubbing down and feeding and watering the double relay of stage-pullers quartered here, or in spanning fresh teams to replace the sweat-streaked, worn ones at the ends of their runs. But not having a partner meant being tied down—like now.

Ten minutes before, the posse had drawn up by the poled enclosure of the station.

"Any sight of the Hondo Kid?" Sheriff Joe McNeill had demanded urgently of Jim, twenty gun-bristling possemen at the lawman's back.

"Who?" Jim asked, taken back by the wild sight of all these men suddenly pounding up.

"The Hondo Kid. That blasted killer robbed the Elk City terminal of yore stage line this morning, took five thousand in payroll cash and clubbed old Rip Wilkinson to within a thread of his life."

"Rip Wilkinson!" The name caught on a hook in old Jim Palmer's throat. Old Rip, the Elk City clerk, had long been his friend. They'd ridden grubline and gambled together. They'd shared the same soogins under desert stars.

The sheriff moved restively. "Guess you know the Hondo Kid has been playing hell, killin' an' robbin' down south. We figger he stopped through Elk City, heading north. We wounded him, we think, while he was making his getaway." The sheriff stared at Jim. "You coming along on the hunt?"

Jim swallowed hard now, thinking what his reply had been to the sheriff's question. Rip Wilkinson was his friend, yet he'd had to tell the sheriff he couldn't join in the hunt to bring in the young hoodlum who'd attacked and robbed Rip. He had to stay here and take care of the station. Thought of it pained Jim until at last he knew he could stand it no longer.

Rubbing gnarled fingers through his thinning shock of mussed hair, Jim stepped out of the bunk-shack, locked the door. He went around back to the harness shop. He pulled his own rig off the rack there, threw in on his horse in the stage station corral.

A tinge of doubt and apprehension at what he was doing ran through him. But there was really nothing wrong in leaving this way, he tried to convince himself. The fences were tight and the door was locked. If anybody wanted to steal—really steal, that is—his being around surely wasn't enough to stop them.

Jim climbed into the saddle, hitched his single gun-belt tighter about his slim waist, and spurred off. He knew he just had to steer clear of Heck Drury, boss of the Midvale stage line. That pinch-faced, long-beaked hawk would kick down a mountain range if he learned the Red Mesa station was left, even momentarily, without a keeper. Yet it was Drury's unrelenting decree that had prevented the rehiring of a hostler to take poor Cal Loftus' place.

Jim cut down off the mesa, but he held close to the tumbled hill country that the burnished morning sun torched with dry heat. He saw no sign of the posse. Unexpectedly, he came upon a fresh trail. And then it happened. . . .

Jim caught the muzzle of his horse just in time to pinch off a nicker. Still holding the animal's muzzle, he lit down. Letting go, he dropped into a crouch. His thumping heart made his breath come quick.

Less than a hundred yards beyond, near a ground-reined horse, hunkered a young man whom he recognized from past glimpses at reward dodgers. It was the young killer, he knew, for whom the brush and rocky slants of these Gila badlands was being scoured at this very minute. The young killer who'd brutally beaten poor old Rip almost to death. . . .

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HEAD down, his cedar-handled six-gun clutched tight in his fist, Jim studied the layout. At the moment, he wished the posse was behind him, backing him up, instead of being scattered to hell and gone in the hills.

The Hondo Kid smoked a cigarette. His face looked boyish and pale. His hand moved with furtive desperateness, taking away and putting the cigarette to his lips.

Jim bellied down, and sharp stones cut him through his shirt and levis. He inched forward, cautiously, wondering all the while why he was stalking the man instead of walking up and throwing a gun-muzzle in his face. Yet, somehow, this approach seemed appropriate for this mountain country. More than once Jim had watched huge tawny cats move up like this on their prey.

A tiny smile grew on the Hondo Kid's purple lips when he looked up into the leveled threat of Jim Palmer's gun. His shirt was dust caked, dark where blood stained it. His denim-blue eyes were as faded as the clothes he wore. Hopelessness sagged the Kid's shoulders.

"Come easy," Jim said, menacingly. But he felt a spark of surprise that this callow youth was the killer who had emptied a cashier's wicket and beaten an old man nearly to death. "Throw off yore gun-belt, and don't make no sudden move."

The Hondo Kid rose unsteadily, swayed a moment. He unbuckled his holster-strap.

Jim watched the listless, resigned nod of the Hondo Kid's head, wondered at the sudden, new paling of his already waxen face. Seemingly frozen by a sight he saw behind Jim, the Kid tried to speak. But no sound came past his twitching lips.

The scrape of movement behind him was Jim's first real warning. Then the blow struck him. A roaring filled Jim's ears. Twisting, he glimpsed the savage, immense eyes of a mountain lion above him, its claws digging into his sides. The long, glistening fangs went for his throat. Jim's legs gave way beneath the beast's weight and fury.

But the Hondo Kid leapt in. The pale youngster grabbed the cat's head with his bare hands. Jim's cry was a weak, hopeless moan. The Kid was unarmed. Jim remembered he'd forced the Kid to drop his gun.

One lash of the tomcat sent the Kid reeling back. It gave Jim a moment's respite. He was thankful for it. But then the Kid came in again. Another lash by the big tomcat, Jim knew, might rip open the Kid's neck or tear off the side of his face.

Then there was the muffled roar of a gun, repeated twice. The quivering, muscled hulk of the lion rolled off Jim. Jim Palmer lay, clawed and trembling, on the ground.

Jim rolled his eyes and saw a jack pine, the low-spreading limb from which the big cat apparently had sprung. He saw the Kid still holding the smoking gun, the weapon he'd retrieved.

The Kid pocketed the gun, came toward Jim to help him up. The Kid weaved on his feet as if there were hardly enough strength in him for the chore.

The rumbling clatter of hoofs of riders sweeping up from around a turn in the rocks straightened the Kid with alarm. The dimpled ends of his mouth quirked grimly. Jim raised up. In spite of the distance Jim recognized Sheriff Joe McNeill and big Gabe Bannister, a shotgun guard for the Midvale stage lines, who rode along beside him.

Jim looked off to where the Kid's horse was tethered, then back again to the Kid. The meaning of the gesture was plain: *Get that horse, Kid. Ride, ride.* But the Kid only smiled wearily, and Jim understood. Five minutes from now the Kid might be able to make it away, but at the moment he was breathless from his fight with the cat. His strength was gone.

The possemen swarmed up on the slight figure of the Hondo Kid, grabbed his arms, made him prisoner.

"What in hell went on here?" the sheriff demanded of Jim, looking at the dead lion and then at Jim's ripped and bloody shirt.

Jim Palmer ran gnarled fingers through his thinning, silver hair, as he explained.

"You're lucky," the sheriff said then. "The Kid's a tough 'un. He ain't usually wastin' no time savin' anybody's hash. I reckon he figgered the cat critter would drag him down next."

Jim wanted to answer that, but the reply clogged in his throat. How could he make this tight-lipped sheriff understand the Kid had really saved his life—at the risk of his own?

Jim remained silent for the rest of the ride back to Elk City. The Hondo Kid rode with the returning party, a prisoner. In town, the Kid was taken to jail, and Jim went to see a doctor. He said little when the town medico salved the long slashes on his arm and side and bound them up. Rip Wilkinson, the doctor gossiped as he worked, was near death as a result of the gun-whipping he'd received that morning.

Outside again, Jim heard one mud-booted cowman mutter to a companion in front of a saloon, "That Kid won't be in that jusgado long if the town's citizens have their way. They'll make him tell soon enough what he done with that five thousand."

"Cut the lynch talk!" his companion said, as if angrily indignant. But then he

added slyly, "Keep it down your craw till after dark."

It would have felt good to be in town, walking along the busy street after having been so long by himself out at the lonely Red Mesa station, but the talk Jim heard took all the edge off his pleasure. The Hondo Kid was in a bad spot, he knew. It was well into the afternoon now. At dark, men would be coming into Elk City carrying ropes, torches, clubs. Jim's heart fluttered nauseously. Once before he'd seen a man—a bony, gaunt puncher—strung up in the town square. It was a sight he never wanted to see again.

Jim moved toward the jail, but sight of a slight, bustling man coming through the crowd stopped him. Jim darted into the shelter of a doorway, waited until Heck Drury, his boss, passed. The face of the stage superintendent, he thought, looked like a sour prune, poking up out of a high, stiff collar. There would be merry hell to pay, Jim knew, if that buzzard ever caught him away from his post. And it had been hours now since he had left it. The evening stage was soon due to come by.

Jim found his horse at the rack. He headed back at a gallop for the stage station.

Long purple streaks of evening crept up over Red Mesa when Jim reached the stage depot. Twilight softened the harsh look of the station's rickety sheds, the corral. Even the solitary, bedraggled poplar that skimpily shaded the station, had a kindly aspect.

Old Jim had just enough time to catch up a relay team and get it in its traces before the night stage from Soledad rolled out of the darkening east. Jim hitched on the fresh team, then watched the Concord coach roll off like a shadow into the orange western sky, leaving him alone again.

Jim rubbed down the six horses that had just come in, gave each a double measure of grain. He watered them after they'd cooled off, pitched a snag of hay out of the mow into each of their bins. That done, he washed himself in the dishpan on the bench under the scrawny poplar. He then went into his bunk-shack to warm over some leftovers from his last meal. He was too tired to bother fixing anything new—just for himself.

The biscuits stuck in his throat. The coffee seemed more bitter than ever before. He had too much to be thinking about, he knew, to be annoyed by food. It was getting dark, and it was a long ride into Elk City.

Abruptly, Jim arose from the table, went outside. He picked out his two likeliest saddlers, then turned the rest of his stock free in the corral. He wasn't exactly sure what he was going to do. What, after all, could he hope to do all by himself against a mob that wanted to beat and torture and hang?

But of one thing he was sure. Maybe the Hondo Kid had held up the Elk City office and clubbed old Wilkinson over the head. But the Kid hadn't meant to hurt him as badly as he had, Jim told himself. Jim ran bony fingers through his graying hair. Yes, he'd met up with too many men in his life, had too much experience with them, not to be able to tell the good from the bad.

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ELK CITY blazed with excitement as Jim Palmer rode in, leading his spare mount. Seeing the uproarious crowds overflowing the boardwalks, and working up a lust for blood, he wondered how he'd possibly been so optimistic as to bring along that spare horse.

Jim tied the two mounts in a shadowed alleyway fifty yards behind the rear of the jail. No light burned in the jail's cell, but a lamp flared brightly in Sheriff McNeill's office. Jim walked stiffly by the office, caught a glimpse through the window of the lawman's pale, earnest face. McNeill was talking to a deputy who was equally grim and pale.

The crowd in the street in front of the jail, Jim saw, still ebbed and flowed. The focal point of excitement was the town square several blocks beyond. There, a huge bonfire, fed by creosote-soaked railroad ties, tongued upward. Like moths, everyone in town was drawn toward that fire. Men carried ropes and clubs. Some brandished rifles. The tide of movement swept Jim helplessly along. He half looked for eagle-beaked Heck Drury, but didn't see him.

The crowd was black beneath the big sycamores of the square, but firelight

danced in their faces. One drunken townsman stood on a box, harangued the clustered throng with words inflaming their hate against the Hondo Kid. Liquor flowed freely from convenient bottles. Near the saddlery, a liquor barrel had been rolled out.

Jim shrank from the gathering mob in dismay and desperation. What could he do? In a little while the Hondo Kid would be kicking out his life from a limb of one of those giant sycamores. So the Kid had robbed the Midvale stage office? So what? Like as not, under similar circumstances, everyone in that crowd might have done the same. There must have been extenuating circumstances. There had to be!

Old Jim sought the solace of a deserted spot, away from everyone. The square had drained the town of its people. Jim looked toward the squat bulk of the jail up the street. What would Sheriff McNeill do when the blood-hungry townsmen came to take his prisoner? And it wouldn't be long now. Surely it would be a futile gesture to oppose this mob, to try to alter the temper of its will.

A single, rising shout from the square caught Jim's heart in a vise. The shout was like a spark set to a fuse. The stampede toward the jail was on!

The air quivered. The very street and building sides seemed to shake. Jim cast one desperate look to the jail. *What would McNeill do?*

Even as Jim looked, he had his answer. The jail-office door was thrown wide, a triangle of light falling from it onto the dusty street. Sheriff McNeill stepped out. Neither pausing nor looking back, he strode off into the darkness of the street, in the direction opposite to that from which the mob was coming. The mob was still a few blocks away—but the jail was theirs! The town lawman, elected by its citizens, was bowing to the wishes of his constituents. . . .

It took a moment for that terrible fact to sink into Jim's brain. Then he dashed for the jail's open door. He found the ring of keys displayed on the desk—ready for the mob, and clearly left there by the sheriff.

With trembling hands, Jim punched a key into the lock on the Kid's cell, swung open its door. Whispering reassurance, he found the Kid's arm, pulled him through the cell door and out through the back, hurrying him, not giving him a chance to speak or ask a question.

The roar of the mob grew. The advance guard was already streaking for the front of the jail. Jim tore loose the tie-reins of the two horses he had stached back of the jail. He and the Kid mounted. A second later, the beat of their horse's hoofs took the place of the man-roar of the mob. Jim led the way.

In the starry darkness, safe beyond town, the Kid's shout stopped Jim.

"How can you do this?" he protested, his pale, innocently-young face tense. "They'll take it out of your hide for this!"

"They don't know it was me," said Jim. "Anyway, I owed it to yuh. If it hadn't been for you that cat—"

"You don't owe me nothin'!" the Kid shot back. "You've done more already than I kin ever pay back."

"What you talking about?"

"Nothin'. Nothin'," the Kid faltered. "Except, I kin make out all right by myself now. Thanks for the horse. I'll try to git it back to yuh someway."

Then he turned, spurred.

Jim waited a moment. Then, in sudden decision, he followed. Where was the Kid going? Could the Kid be unwittingly leading him to the money? If he could recover that stolen five thousand, Jim thought almost eagerly, he might give it to the mob. Maybe that would quiet them for a while, until a just settlement might be arranged for the Kid.

The hill trail was a long one. It led out and beyond Red Mesa. Several times Jim thought he'd lost it. Finally, it ended at a little spreak tucked back in the hills, where a light streamed from a ranch-shack window. Jim dismounted, approached cautiously on foot.

Curtains prettied the ranch-shack's window. In the dark, Jim could make out flowers growing neatly in cans along the sill. A young woman came to the ranch-shack's door. At sight of the Kid, she threw her arms about him.

Hidden behind a shadowing juniper, Jim plainly saw it all. The gleam of radiant gladness in the woman's strained face—she was obviously the Kid's wife. A tot, two or three years old, toddled after the young woman, clung to her calico skirt.

The Kid lifted the child high in the air, then held it close to him. Jim felt like an intruder. Finally, he slipped away from this privacy he did not further wish to violate. But in his heart he was glad of one thing. He was surer than ever now that he had made no mistake in sizing up the Kid. . . .

Jim Palmer, tired and worn, finally made it back to the gloomy, solitary sprawl of the Red Mesa stage station. Horses moved restively in the corral. Jim pulled off his heavy, mud-crusted boots, then crawled into his bunk. He was so completely exhausted, he had trouble falling asleep. Through his mind passed in rapid review all the crowded events of the day just passed.

Had it been only that morning Sheriff McNeill and his posse had come by to say the Hondo Kid had robbed the Midvale station in Elk City of five thousand dollars and clubbed old Rip Wilkinson almost to death? It seemed an eternity ago, Jim mused, since he went out, found the Kid—and the Kid, at the risk of his neck had saved him from that mountain lion. The mob, the subsequent escape from jail, and all the rest were a jumble in Jim's tired brain as he finally dozed.

Jim awakened with a start. Morning sun streamed hotly through the bunk-shack's sash. His heart began a quick beat as he looked at the clock. He had overslept! But what about the morning stage that was supposed to pull in just before eight? It was now twenty after nine!

Jim pulled on his boots, hurried outside. He stared at the horizon where the Soledad trail disappeared, then looked back at the horse corral. It was impossible the coach could have pulled in and then out again while he still slept. The coach was therefore better than an hour and a half late.

Jim went to the harness shed, hauled out the rig. He snaked out a fresh team from the corral and got them ready. A quarter of an hour later the dusty stage came rocking wildly into sight.

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JIM ran his gnarled fingers troubledly through his thinning, silver hair. Only one man was on the stage's box. Gabe Bannister should have been up there too, riding guard. Holding the lines was Fritz Holder, the coach's regular driver, but Fritz was wearing no hat. His right shirtsleeve was ripped away, and his arm was tied with a bloodsoaked bandage.

"The Hondo Kid!" Holder exclaimed, fighting the team to a stop. "That murderin' son done took the replacement payroll we was bringin' in—five thousand more!"

"Wha-at?" Jim gasped.

"Gabe Bannister is inside the coach—dead. Our one passenger is in there—bad shot up. We got to get him to Elk City right away!"

Jim Palmer's tongue was dry clay inside his mouth. His legs and arms felt like lead as he put the fresh team to the tugs.

Fritz Holder bathed blood from his face at the dishpan under the poplar. He said that he himself had been hit over the head and knocked unconscious by the Kid, and had roused only a little while previously, to take the stage in hand again. "How that killin' devil broke out of the Elk City jail last night, nobody knows. Poor Gabe Bannister would be livin' right now, if that hadn't happened!"

Within the minute, Fritz Holder had the coach rolling on again toward Elk City. Jim stared after it with lifeless eyes. The urge was in him to saddle up and follow, tell Sheriff McNeill all he knew. Yes, even about the unpretentious little ranch where the Kid lived. But after cleaning out this last stage, the Kid would certainly have hit the trail for safer parts. Telling the sheriff was likely only to bring disgrace to the Kid's innocent wife and baby.

Jim tried to swallow past the aching knot in his throat. He had blundered horribly, fearfully. His silly, sentimental interference had put innocent Gabe Bannister's blood on his head. The seeming innocence and bewilderment in the Kid's face was only a bland mask for a killer's irrepressible temper and lust. Jim told himself that—and then he cursed. For, try as he might, he knew he still couldn't convince himself that the man who'd saved his life was a killer.

Jim screwed his kak on his horse, and pointed toward town. Halfway there, he picked up the dust plume of a compact group of riders streaking across the hills to the east. Yesterday, he had seen this

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posse on a similar hunt, but fate, he remembered, had reserved the quarry for his own finding.

Old Jim followed the party of riders for half an hour. They shortcutted to a point on the trail where, apparently, the latest holdup had been staged. Then, straight as a bullet, he saw, they aimed toward the tiny hill spread to which the Kid had fled the preceding night! Somehow, they must have picked up that sign at the holdup point.

Jim Palmer licked his dust-dry lips, squinted his eyes against the bright sun as he circled wide to come at the Kid's ranch from behind. Everything seemed quiet and deserted. No smoke came from the lone brick chimney. No one moved about the yard. The place was as drearily empty of human beings as Red Mesa stage station in the day's long hours.

Jim saw the posse slow, fan out for action as they approached the house. A sudden cracking whine sheered from the house. A puff of rifle smoke lifted lazily. Instantly, the possemen scattered for cover. A moment, and then their barrage thundered toward the house.

Old Jim left his saddle at a sudden nicker from his horse. Was another horse close by? He dropped reins, and slipped ahead, sixgun palmed.

In a wooded pocket just behind the house, he found a saddled and packed horse pawing impatiently. A slicker roll rode behind the packed horse's cantle; saddlebags, bulging tight, were slung from the horn. The Kid's imminent getaway must have been foiled at just the last second by the posse's arrival.

A steady tattoo of fire from the house held off the posse. The Kid, Jim realized suddenly, was making a brave stand, playing for the chance to make it out the back way.

And then, suddenly, old Jim Palmer saw a new threat that altered the whole set-up.

Up on the slope above the ranch-shack, the possemen had found a stake-sided wagon. The wagon's bed was piled more than two feet high with hay. A match had been applied, and flame shot upward from it now. A wind spread the fire. The entire, hay-loaded wagon blazed.

One of the possemen moved to kick a

restraining block out from under the wheels. Jim saw what was going to happen. The flaming cargo woud crash down against the house, set fire to it, and burn out its besieged occupants.

The posseman kicked at the block. Jim held his breath, helplessly. There came a sudden cessation of fire from the house. The posseman hesitated in his labors. Jim was surprised at what he saw then. For the Hondo Kid stepped suddenly forward out of the house. In his hand he held a stick. At the end of the stick was tied a ragged strip of white cloth.

The Hondo Kid was surrendering!

But a glint of sun on steel at the house's window caught Jim's eyes. His breath choked off raggedly. The short section of refle barrel poked from that window was trained with deadly intent on the Kid's back.

With sudden illumination, Jim Palmer understood. There was someone else in this beside the Kid. The Kid was playing a secondary role. Just as he was being forced by that rifle now, maybe he'd been forced to pull the holdups.

Quickly, Jim holstered his gun. His ancient joints creaked, but he managed, breath gasping, to pull himself up the tree to which the packed horse was tied. Drawing himself up to the first broad, projecting limb, he eased himself out on it like a mountain cat.

Jim held his breath as the cabin's rear door came suddenly open. A figure streaked from the cabin toward the waiting horse. It was a young figure, lithe and muscled, not at all unlike that of the young fellow who was carrying the white banner of surrender out front. But even from his perch, Jim read in the crouched, furtive run—the stride of a killer.

As the fleeing man swung his left leg over the packed horse's saddle, Jim dropped. The crashing impact of his frail body was enough to carry them both to the ground. In his excitement, Jim hardly felt the burn of the bullet biting into his side as the killer's gun exploded.

The killer was young and powerful. The fury of desperation battled for him, too. A solid fist struck old Jim's jaw, and he knew the man was slipping from his grasp. Wildly, he grabbed for a hold as

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they rolled on the ground. But he missed the killer's booted leg.

The killer struggled up. He kicked the toe of his boot into Jim's ribs. Then Jim looked up into the gaping muzzle of a .45 pointing directly between his eyes.

A gun cracked sharply. A second and third shot echoed the first—the posse was taking up the game.

Jim saw the gun slip from the killer's suddenly lifeless hand. Then the killer broke at the middle. He came apart in sections—first his head drooping, then his knees giving way. He pawed on the ground until death stilled him.

This gent was the real Hondo Kid, Jim knew that without being told. He remembered the reward dodger he'd seen for the Kid, and he knew now why he'd made the mistake. Except for a killer-like hardness, the real Kid was a replica of the fellow who'd saved him from the mountain cat.

The other fellow came up now, ringed by members of the posse. He looked down at the fallen figure on the ground. "My brother—" he murmured.

"Your brother?" exclaimed Sheriff McNeill, his thin lips tight. "The Kid's right name was Jeffers. I thought yours was Carson. Isn't this the Carson ranch?"

"My name is Phil Carson," the young fellow admitted. "But when my dad died, my mother married a fellow named Jeffers. I never saw the Kid, my half brother, till just before Mother died. He was wild. She asked me to take care of him. But when she died, he ran off. I didn't see him until a week ago, after the first Midvale robbery. I—"

Jim Palmer hurried to clutch young Phil Carson's arm. "Where's the money?" he asked. "The money that was stolen?" He was afraid if he didn't change the subject Phil might go into incriminating details. He might say it was himself and not the Kid whom Jim had cracked out of jail. The possemen, apparently, still didn't realize Phil had lead them off the trail when they were after the Kid. As if it could have been anyone but innocent Phil who'd saved him from that mountain lion.

Jim breathed easier as Phil seemed to take his cue. It was all cleared up then, mostly by the story Phil Carson, the Hondo

Kid's half brother, told. The posse found the ten thousand dollars stolen from the stage line in the packed horse's saddlebags.

While they were busy with that, Jim looked at the bloody bullet-gouge in his side. The medico in Elk City would have to treat it. Then Jim saw Phil Carson standing dejectedly by the fallen body of his half brother, head bowed.

A hard lump choked Jim's throat. It was tough for this young Phil Carson with the wife and baby, and the half-brother who'd gone wrong. He appreciated young Phil's having acted as he did. What choice was there but to steer that posse from the trail of his mother's son after the robbery of the Midvale?

Jim moved to speak consolingly to young Phil, when he spied Heck Drury, the Midvale superintendent, making a hawkline toward him from some newly arrived riders. Jim's first impulse was to fade. He'd left the Red Mesa station unattended. Yet, honestly, how could that pinch-faced Drury upbraid him for that now? Even if he was a demanding old boss.

"It looks like you'll be getting an assistant," Drury said. He looked almost kindly.

"An assistant?"

"You earned it yourself, Palmer, saving the company's ten thousand dollars."

It gave Jim a brilliant idea. He knew whom he'd like to get as an assistant—though Drury would probably feel like kicking down a mountain range when he heard the choice. That stage station would make a nice fill-in job for the Hondo Kid's half-brother. Phil Carson could make some ready cash to fix this spread of his up right.

"Thanks, Mr. Drury," Jim said. "Thanks." But his mind was elsewhere.

He was already scratching his old head as to how he was going to put up Phil Carson's wife—and kid—in the stage-station's one-room bunk-shack. . . .

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